don't want you to wonder, darling I need you to know

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by JoeyAlohaDream

Summary

“Where is he Benny?” Bucky shakes him, feeling more alive than he has since before he walked into that phone booth in London.

“They beat him,” Benny breathes out. “Then they took him to the cooler.”

Bucky drops his hands, releasing Benny’s jacket and stumbling back a step.

“What?” He can’t help but stare at Benny uncomprehendingly because Gale is a senior officer here. He goes to meetings with the Krauts and negotiates for supplies and he’s Gale. Gentle, quiet, sweet Gale and how could anyone hurt him?

“For how long?” Bucky practically yells. The cooler? He thinks and feels his heart sink. Gale can’t go to solitary confinement, none of them can survive this place alone and Gale has been wasting away even in a room full of people who care about him.

Gale is sent to solitary confinement and John's world changes in an instant.

Notes

Series and Story title from the song "Carry You Home" by Alex Warren.

All stories are inspired by the portrayal of the actors in the AppleTV show.

See the end of the work for more notes

August 1940 – Randolph Field, Texas

The dry Texas heat is something that Bucky thinks he'll never get used to. Sweat rolls down his neck from his hair and he can feel it leave a trail down his spine.

"Take off that damn jacket Bucky, you're done flying and you're gonna give yourself heatstroke."

Bucky rolls his head on his neck to smirk at Gale, seated in the prickly brown grass next to him an arm's length away. The hill they're perched on overlooks the airstrip they both landed on an hour ago. It was their first time flying their own fort and they both agreed that they had too much energy and adrenaline pumping to just go back to the mess and wait for the other cadets to finish their turns. Despite the unforgiving sun beating down, this spot gives them the perfect view to watch their comrades complete their first landings behind the yoke.

"Can't do that Buck," Bucky smiles at his friend, pleased when all he gets at the nickname nowadays is a slight eye roll, no longer an outright denial. "It's a part of me now, I'm gonna wear it till I die."

"I can help you along with that if you want," Gale side eyes him with a teasing glint in his blue eyes that makes Bucky laugh. The smile on his friend's face has been present from the moment he dropped out of the hatch of his plane, feet back on the ground but eyes still looking to the sky.

He is sure that he could count on one hand the number of genuine, happy smiles he's seen from Gale in the six months he's known him, and now, sitting in the dead grass, melting from the sun, first flight of hundreds to come completed, he can't seem to stop grinning. It makes him feel a warmth inside that has nothing to do with heat.

"You wouldn't last two hours around here without me Buck," Bucky reaches over to give his shoulder a shove, laughing when Gale leans back fast enough to dodge the touch. "'Fraid you're stuck with me and my *damn jacket*."

Gale huffs a laugh but doesn't voice a protest to either statement and Bucky decides to take that as a win, feeling smug.

"Veal should be landing soon," Gale tells him, squinting at his watch.

"Lucky bastard is still experiencing the thrill and we're stuck in the

dirt," Bucky pulls out a cigarette and lights it. Gale waves a hand in front of face as the smokes drifts towards him, so Bucky gets up to switch sides. He plops himself down on Gale's right so he's down wind of him, takes a drag and stretches his legs out in front of him.

When he looks back at the younger man, he meets blue eyes and a slightly furrowed brow. It feels like he's being studied and his skin prickles slightly.

He's been slowly getting used to the intense way Gale seems to focus on all things. The first time he noticed it was with flight manuals and plane schematics, then it was weather analysis and flight plans. He used to poke fun at his roommate about the amount of time he spent with his head buried in the military issue handbooks they'd all been given.

Lately though, now that Bucky has regularly dragged Gale away from studying a couple times a week for some real fun, now that Bucky is confident that they're not just roommates, not just fellow cadets, that they're *friends*, he feels that intense focus on him frequently and he doesn't know how to feel about it yet. Though he thinks he might be starting to like it more than he should.

"What?" Bucky turns his head to blow smoke away from Gale.

"Nothing," Gale turns away at his question and clears his throat. "And don't be dramatic, we'll be flying again tomorrow, Bucky."

"Can't come soon enough," Bucky says and leans back to recline on his elbows.

Gale is smiling again when he leans back to match Bucky's position. "Yeah, you're not wrong."

Bucky takes a moment to look his friend over. His sheepskin is folded neatly at his feet, gloves laid on top. His long blonde hair that Bucky still can't figure out how he managed to convince the powers that be not to cut a little closer to regulation is wind swept and messy, but still effortlessly cool looking. His cheeks have a healthy flush from the wind or the sun, Bucky can't tell. Most notably though, he looks *happy*. Bucky had noticed from the start, before he'd given him his name and claimed him as his own, that Gale wore a carefully controlled mask around everyone until he'd had time to assess them. He let it slip a fraction around those he gained respect for, those that he found to be good people. He was kind to everyone, even the ones who didn't deserve it.

But he never really let his guard down all the way, never looked like he was at ease in his surroundings, even with Bucky. He had a look about him like something had been dragging him down for a long time, but he'd simply gotten used to the weight instead of shrugging it off. It pained Bucky to think about it, but right now he thinks it's the closest to an unburdened Gale he's ever seen. It doesn't look like anything is weighing him down, he looks like he could float away.

"You loved it as much as I did, huh?" Bucky asks him.

"More," Gale laughs. Bucky watches as he removes his little tin of toothpicks from his pocket, takes one out and sticks it between his teeth. He returns the trusty tin and then brings both hands up to rest behind his head and stares up into the sky. "Never felt anything like it in my life."

Gale's watching the clouds, but Bucky can't take his eyes off him.

"How'd it feel?"

"You were up there too Bucky," Gale points out. "You know what it felt like."

"Humor me," Bucky rolls his eyes and moves his leg enough that he can kick Gale's boot with his own, laughs when Gale kicks him back. "Tell me how it felt to you."

He watches as the little sliver of wood between plump lips is rolled around for the few moments Gale seems to take to decide if he's going to share anything with Bucky. Gale is still smiling, still looking at the sky when he finally speaks.

"I was shaking like a leaf walking to the plane this morning," he admits with a soft huff and a shake of his head. Bucky smiles at him even though he can't see it. He remembers how his stomach had turned just at the thought of breakfast and how his hand had shook with nerves taking the coffee he'd opted for.

"But when I climbed into the cockpit and took that left seat, I don't know," Gale continues, voice its usual soft-spoken, low timbre that Bucky's eager to hear every morning and doesn't question why. "It's like I settled. Like everything settled."

Gale turns his head and looks at him, so Bucky gives him what he hopes is an encouraging look, not wanting to break the moment, eager to hear what Gale has to say. Eager to see if it matches with his own

experience. Eager to collect this piece of Gale because he hasn't been given much in six months, and the little pieces he has gathered he had to pry out of the other man. And he treasures them all.

"Felt like every bit of what we've been learning, every bit of what we've been preparing for was at my fingertips and I felt prepared, competent." Gale shares as he turns away to look back at the sky. "It was a good feeling."

Bucky isn't surprised. He has noticed that Gale likes to have control in situations. He sits with his back to a wall where he can see every door in every room they gather in. His uniform is pristine, his hair styled, his routines for waking and preparing for bed never change and he never misses a step.

"When I finished the pre-flight check though and we took off down that runway, when we got the green flag," Gale's eyes are closed and Bucky imagines Gale is sifting through the morning's events, putting himself back in that left seat. "I think I felt like I was flying before the wheels left the ground. That moment before lift-off, you know the one, it was like I could feel the wings telling me that they were ready to go. And when I pulled back on the yoke, I felt like I was escaping the ground."

Bucky's focus on Gale's profile as he speaks is unwavering, hanging on every word. He thinks, he knows, this is the most words Gale has spoken in one sitting in six months. He wants more, he wants them all.

"And once we were up, really up at altitude and soaring," Gale breathes out, still smiling. "I just kept feeling like I was breaking some rule, 'cause how could I be allowed to be up there, higher than the birds?"

Bucky watches as Gale's eyes open back up, squinting against the bright afternoon sun to look back into the clouds. He feels like Gale has more to say to so he stays quiet, continues just looking at him, wondering if he should turn his head and look at the sky too. He doesn't want to, so he doesn't.

"Up there, for the first time in as long as I can remember my mind was quiet and I didn't feel nervous or worried or anything at all," Gale says softly. "I think it felt like bliss."

He finishes with his lips still ticked up at the corners and Bucky feels a warmth growing in his chest. He's felt it a few times around Gale now,

mostly in moments where he realizes how smart he is, how kind he is, and on rare occasions how socially incompetent he is.

Gale turns to look at him again, and his eyes hold a vulnerability that Bucky hasn't yet seen in him. Bucky realizes he hasn't responded so he props himself up his elbow.

"I think I felt all that too, Buck," he admits. "Don't think I could put it quite so eloquently as you do, you poet, but I'm glad I've got you around to makes words come out so nice."

He laughs out loud when Gale kicks him again, but he's grinning back at Bucky.

"You know how else I felt up there?" Gale asks. Bucky looks over, eager to hear more. "Fucking cold. Gotta buy us some scarves when we get a chance to go off post."

Bucky laughs and rolls his eyes, "I'm sure the shelves will be fully stocked with all the cold weather gear you can imagine in *August* in *Texas*, Buck." It earns him another kick, that one smarting a bit. He grins at the sky.

They lay there in the grass in silence for a while before Bucky feels the need to speak again. He doesn't mind the silence, but it's rare to have a moment alone with Gale and he wants to talk to him, to hear him talk back without the filter he keeps on around a crowd for a bit longer.

"You wanna do it forever?" Bucky asks him.

"What, fly?" Gale pulls himself up from his reclining position and leans back on his hands once again. Bucky moves to mirror his position, nodding. "I don't know, maybe. Could make a career out of it I guess."

"Something that makes you feel 'bliss' is something you should hold onto, don't ya think?" Bucky prods.

Gale gives him a look he can't decipher but he hums a noise of agreement.

"So," Bucky sits up dramatically. "You and I become the two best pilots in the Air Force, we fly over to Europe, drop our bombs right on Hitler himself and single-handedly, *no* double-handedly," he waggles his eyebrows at Gale and smiles when it earns him a laugh and an eye

roll. “We double-handedly end the war. Where will you go? Plant your roots deep in the Cowboy state but keep your head in the clouds?”

“I’d go wherever the Air Force tells me to go Bucky. That’s how the military works,” Gale says, sounding exasperated, but fond too, Bucky thinks.

“Buck,” Bucky pushes at his shoulder, “We just killed Hitler and ended the war, they’re letting you pick where you go next, so where’s it going to be?”

Gale shakes his head and mutters something under his breath that Bucky can’t quite make out but thinks sounds like ‘ridiculous’. But then he gets a thoughtful look on his face and Bucky knows he’s going to answer Bucky’s silly question in response to his ridiculous scenario. And that’s just one more thing he likes about Gale. He indulges him. He doesn’t brush off his ramblings or think his big personality is too much. Bucky can be himself with Gale, because he knows Gale genuinely likes who he is and it’s a hell of a feeling. Being known and accepted, especially by someone as *good* as Gale.

“Not Wyoming,” Gale finally replies, and it surprises Bucky, but only a little. He can’t really recall the other man sharing any memories of home other than a mention of his high school sweetheart Marge and that he likes horses. But there’s a finality to Gale’s tone, despite the fact that he’s still smiling, so Bucky doesn’t push it.

Someday, you’re going to tell me, he thinks. *Someday, you’re going to tell me all of it.*

“Maybe Texas?” Gale says with a shrug. “I don’t hate it here.”

Bucky barks out a laugh.

“Buck, come on,” he practically whines, throwing his hands in the air. “You don’t hate it? You’re setting the bar so low you can’t even trip over it.”

Gale huffs his quiet laugh into his hand before looking at Bucky with that same exasperated fondness. “Alright, just let me think about it. I’ll cook up a good answer if you give me some time. What about you? Where will you go?”

The blue of Gale’s eyes seems brighter with the way the sun is hitting them, Bucky notices. He’s only known him a handful of months, would it be silly to say *wherever you go?*

He clears his throat and doesn't hesitate before replying with, "New York."

"You and your Yankees," Gale laughs and Bucky grins at him.

They both turn to look at the sky.

"Think of a real answer yet, Buck?" He pushes, just to push.

"It's been three damn minutes, Bucky," Gale scolds. "I'm still thinking. Ask me another time."

And so, Bucky does.

November 1944 – Stalag Luft III

The silence of their hut is only broken by the wind howling, the chill in the air reaching practically unbearable lows as the cold seeps through the cracks in the walls. A few men toss and turn restlessly in their bunks, a few more are snoring at varying decibel levels. After spending over a year in these surroundings, the sounds have become part of the normal background noise of Bucky's life.

Gone are the familiar rumblings of military jeeps going by, the pleasant vibration of an aircraft going overhead that he'd gotten used to in Texas, the various bases around the states and then again in England. At least he's no stranger to sleeping amongst over a dozen other men. There is familiarity in that, even if it doesn't bring him the same comfort these days as it did when he first arrived in this hellscape.

Nothing really seems to bring him comfort anymore.

His mind is slowly clearing from the night's attempt rest, his body naturally knowing that morning is creeping up on them despite the shuttered windows. A new day that will feel the same as the previous three-hundred days is dawning and Bucky does not want to face this one any more than he did the last. He yawns and blinks his eyes open, startling slightly when the arm wrapped around his waist tightens briefly.

He can't help the small smile that tugs at the corner of his mouth as

he looks down at the head that is settled on his chest, messy blond strands of hair tickling his chin when he moves.

He was wrong before. There is one thing in this godforsaken place that brings him comfort still. He moves his arm to wrap it around the thin shoulders of his best friend, feels him shiver as his movement lifts their blanket and moves his other hand over the now concerningly slim waist.

“Did you know you talk in your sleep?” Gale’s raspy voice comes out whisper soft and it makes a warmth that is rare to feel these days bloom in Bucky’s chest as he feels him nuzzle his face into his chest, proud that he’s the only one that gets to see this side of Gale. Seems Gale is not quite ready to face the day, despite that fact that he always makes sure to be the first one up.

“Do I?” Bucky whispers his question back, letting his lips brush the greasy hair that’s sticking up in all directions. “You never mentioned it before.”

The smaller man’s body tenses for just a moment but relaxes again and Bucky feels Gale’s weight settle more heavily onto him. It’s grounding him and he doesn’t think he’d be able to get any sleep at all most nights if they couldn’t bunk together. Thankful for the cold that forces them all to double up. Makes him dread the spring when his excuse to hold and be held by Gale will go away with the return of the warm air.

“You never used to,” Gale says softly. “Not before all this.”

Bucky doesn’t reply to that, just breathes in and out, tries to keep his mind blank instead of allowing the anger surface at yet another piece of evidence of how he’s changed. How he’s different now.

He wishes he’d had the courage to kiss Gale sooner than he did, if only for the fact that Gale would have had the chance to be held by the version of him he was before all this. He hadn’t understood the gravity behind Gale’s words when he’d shared that he’d broken it off with Marge in a letter after they returned from Algeria. He had thought it was Gale being his usual self-sacrificing self, wanting to spare the girl he loved the pain of his loss that he seemed to think was inevitable after his close call during that mission. His assumption blinded him from the reality that Gale had shared with him under the stars the night before he went down; that Gale had felt something for him since flight school, that he’d only reconnected with Marge in

Texas after spending nine months watching Bucky chase down women at every opportunity, that he felt he was meant to love him from a distance, and that he learned to be content with the friendship Bucky offered him.

The vulnerability behind Gale's softly spoken confession, said to the stars instead of to him, like he was afraid of Bucky's reaction when he'd said, *"I love you and the thought of dying, of you dying, without having told you that you're the most important person in my life, that you have been since we met and that you will be until I die, well I just couldn't stand that. I've never lied to you about anything but this and I don't want to lie anymore, John,"* had brought tears to his eyes and an ache to his heart.

He had wanted Gale for longer than he could remember and the fact that they'd been so blind to it, that they'd both been so good at hiding behind masks to shield each other from their truths, was a startling realization.

With no hesitation he'd said the words back and in the next moment, he'd finally had the chance to run his fingers through that soft blonde hair, to cradle his face in his large hands instead of his usual quick stolen caress disguised as a friendly pat, and to taste his smile.

It feels like a big cosmic joke most days that he waited for years to tell Gale how he feels and then after only one evening of learning what those pouty lips felt like against his, *soft, so unbelievably soft,* what sounds Gale makes when he's overwhelmed with feeling, with pleasure, what it feels like to be home in a lover's hold, he'd gone to London and Gale had fallen out of the sky.

Since then, Bucky can count the number of kisses they've shared on one hand and while each one was perfect, it is a constant worry that this is all they'll ever have. It makes his chest ache when he thinks about not having a future with Gale. About Gale not having a future at all. His own lack of a potential future does not bring that same godawful feeling, and that should concern him more than it does, but it just doesn't.

"You okay John?" That raspy whisper breaks him from his thoughts, and he realizes he had drifted away again. Gale's fingers are drawing mindless patterns onto his side and stomach, and he wonders how long that's been happening because he couldn't feel it until now. He tightens his arm around the smaller man and brings his lips to the top of his head.

“As okay as I ever am these days, Buck,” Bucky tells him truthfully.

He wants to ask what he said in his sleep. He’d told Gale vague details about his capture and his walk through that violent, angry, decimated town, but he hadn’t told him about the wagon or the smashed in skull or the blood that he still swears he can feel on his face some days. Hopes that his mind hasn’t betrayed him and spilled his secrets while he sleeps.

He’d been dreaming about sitting in the Texas sun after their first flights, about the first time he’d asked the question that became a constant game of fantasy between them as the years went on. A question that changed the night before London from “Where will you go?” to “Where will we go?”. Bucky wonders if he’d been talking in his sleep about how even then, he’d wanted to follow Gale anywhere.

But he doesn’t ask, doesn’t really want to know, and really doesn’t want to talk about any of it.

“I don’t like that answer, Bucky,” Gale lifts his head and turns in his arms slightly until his chin is resting on Bucky’s chest and he’s locking those blue eyes onto his own. His hair is a mess; Bucky has never met anyone prone to worse bedhead than Gale and he still finds it incredibly endearing.

“I know you don’t, Buck.” His response gets him narrowed eyes and a frown, so he runs his hand over those blonde locks and attempts to smooth them down for the other man. Gale’s eyes soften at the gesture, but he still looks upset.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Gale whispers, oddly vulnerable in the stillness of this random morning. He wonders if his mind had drifted for longer than he thought as he sees the concern in Gale’s eyes.

Bucky takes in the other man’s pale face, his hollow cheeks, the scars on them that he still doesn’t know the story behind, because he never even asked about them and he doesn’t know why. He looks terrible and he looks beautiful and looking at him hurts all of a sudden and he doesn’t know why that is either.

“I’m right here,” he tells the younger man. Eyes scan over his face and Bucky feels like he’s being studied like one of Gale’s calculus equations. He wishes Gale could solve him and make him right again.

“I know you are. Just don’t leave me alone in here,” he looks away briefly before meeting Bucky’s eyes again. “I don’t do well without

you, John."

Bucky runs his fingers through that greasy hair again before letting his hand fall to the back of Gale's neck to give it a squeeze. He remembers a few days after he'd arrived here, after sleeping off the exhaustion and through the worst of his lingering concussion, that Gale had opened up to him about his weeks here without him.

"They still need their Major. They need someone to lead them, keep them sane and give them a purpose." Gale had told him. "I've been trying to be that for them, but when Brady showed up and said you'd jumped with him, I really struggled to keep it together."

He'd taken a shuddering breath and looked at Bucky, his eyes so expressive, full of pain, that it made his heart clench in his chest. "I'm really glad you're here, John. And I know that makes me selfish, but I just can't do this without you."

Now he looks into those expressive blue eyes again and feels nothing but guilt because while his body has been physically present in the Camp, he hasn't been the shoulder for Gale to lean on like he used to be. He hasn't been leading the boys, hasn't been acting like their Major. Yet Gale doesn't seem to mind. He looks at Bucky every day with soft eyes and a smile, as if his physical presence is all he needs, and Bucky just lets him carry the weight of the Camp on his bony shoulders.

But he doesn't know how to fix it, how to fix himself so he just squeezes the back of Gale's neck and lets his thumb stroke behind his ear and tells him, "I won't ever let you be alone again then." He doesn't even blame Gale when he looks at him like he doesn't believe him.

He brings his hand around to cup the younger man's cheek and smiles when Gale leans into the touch. He runs his thumb over his bottom lip, eyes crinkling when it moves to form a pout, let's his thumb sweep up over a too sharp cheekbone and feels the smile slip from his own face. He can never seem to hold onto it for long these days, every hard fought and even harder to grasp moment of softness seems to be immediately hardened back out by a stark reminder of their harsh circumstances.

"Need to see if we can get you a little something extra to eat today," he speaks around a frown, still sweeping his thumb back and forth. Gale's eyes close even as he shakes his head at Bucky's words.

“I’m fine Bucky,” the younger man tells him and Bucky wonders when it became so easy for them to lie to one another.

“Sure you are, Buck,” Bucky says, and he removes his hand from Gale’s face to rub it over his own eyes. “We’re all just fine and dandy.”

When he looks back at Gale, he tries to think of something to say to get them back to the relaxed moment of before. Words used to come to him and flow out of him like water and now his well is all dried up. Each day he pulls the rope up only to find the bucket at the end of it empty. Gale is looking at him like removing his touch from his face was a personal punishment, and Bucky doesn’t want to ever be looked like that by him again.

“I’m sorry,” Gale says, chin still resting on Bucky’s chest. Bucky can’t help the laugh that startles out of him, it sounds harsh to his own ears, and then wants to strangle himself when Gale turns and lays his head back down on his chest, stealing Bucky’s view of his face away.

“Hey now,” Bucky gentles, putting his hand in that mess of hair and scratching his dirty nails against his scalp. “I’m not laughing at you Buck. Just don’t apologize for starving in a Stalag like it’s your own goddamn fault, ya dummy. I’m not mad at you, just worried is all.”

Gale doesn’t say anything in return, but Bucky feels him let out a shaky breath and nuzzle his face against his chest again. He continues to scratch his scalp.

“It’ll be light out soon,” he points out. “Do you want to get up? I know you like to be your buttoned up, handsome self before the boys are out of bed.”

To Bucky’s surprise he feels Gale shake his head against his chest and the arm thrown over his waist tightens.

“Can you..” Bucky has to strain to hear the whispered words but even after leaning his head down, he misses the end of the question.

“Can I what, Buck?”

He feels the younger man’s chest move against his side as he lets out a heavy sigh.

“Can you just hold me for a little longer?”

The whispered words threaten Bucky’s composure, and he feels a rush

of affection so strong for the man draped over him he nearly wants to cry. He wraps both arms around him and pulls him closer, letting one hand move in slow strokes up and down his arm.

Gale never asks for anything even though Bucky can see right through him most of the time and knows that he *wants* things fiercely. Bucky wants to give him everything and yet in here, there is nothing to give. But he can do this, and he will.

“Of course, Buck,” he leans down and presses a kiss to the other man’s head. “Long as you want and every night until Spring.” *I’ll break your bed when the air gets warm just so we have an excuse to share again,* he thinks irrationally.

“And then every night once we’re home,” Gale whispers, somehow sounding equal parts confident and vulnerable. They didn’t have time to talk about after the war the night before London, before Bremen. And now Bucky has a hard time believing there will be an after.

“Sure Buck.” Bucky hopes with everything in him that it isn’t the lie it feels like it is.

“Where will we go?” Buck speaks the question softly into his shirt and Bucky feels the stirring of a smile but can’t manage to get his lips to form it. He knows Gale wouldn’t judge him for it, would look at him with kind eyes and try again to coax it out.

“Anywhere but Germany.” His heart is not in it and he’s breaking his own rule. *“Have a little fun, it’s a fantasy, Buck. Until we can make it a reality,”* he’d told Gale around the fifth time he’d asked him, after he’d gotten another boring, logical response.

“I promise we’ll make that one a reality, John,” Gale tells him, and though his voice is quiet in the pre-dawn light, it holds a confidence that Bucky is proud he hasn’t lost yet. Unlike him. Bucky can’t find it in himself to believe those words, but he still believes in Gale so that will have to be enough for now.

December 1944 – Stalag Luft III

The sun on the Bucky’s back does nothing to warm him as he sits on a pile of some kind of rubble and stares at the fence straight in front of him. He’d done his experiments, figured out that this collection of rocks is as close as he can get before the guards in the tower start

tensing, focusing on him.

No day in the Camp is a good day, but today is a bad one. He'd woken up without Gale's warmth, the other man having stayed up all night fiddling with his radio and whispering with Alex. The bitterness Bucky had felt at realizing the only time they get alone together had been stolen from him made him feel ugly inside.

The goons had been more tense than usual, getting more physical with their hands and more biting with their words. News of the Russians slowly pushing this way made the SS and the regular guards quicker to dole out punishment. Just this morning in line for water Bucky had watched one of them let his dog get close enough to one of the Tuskegee men to rip the cuffs of his pant leg. The fact that he could do nothing but watch or risk those same teeth being turned on him had his anger spiking with no outlet in site.

A fire at been lit in him after the invasion of Europe. When Colonel Clark had informed them that it was inevitable now that this would be ending with a fight, a mass execution or a forced march, he'd been awake finally. He'd planned and learned and trained. But that had been months ago and it's hard to feel like something is inevitable when still nothing ever fucking happens. He'd backslid. The worst thing he'd done is get into a physical fight with Gale, and he hasn't let it get that far again. But he's finding it hard to believe anything at all will happen and it makes his brain fog more often than not.

So, he's sitting on this rock pile, thankful that there is no snow on the ground, even though he can feel it coming in the air, and fantasizing about what could await him outside that fence. He's never been so sedentary in his life, but lately that's all he can bring himself to be. At least he made it out of the bunkhouse today, so he'll call it a victory and soak up some sun.

The sound of footsteps kicking up gravel approaching from behind him get his attention, but he keeps his focus on the fence. He already knows that it's Gale. He's the only one that bothers to check on him most days and he knows well enough to make his presence known, not to sneak up him.

Somedays he waits for these little check-ins, somedays he dreads them and today he just wants Gale to leave him alone.

"Bucky," Gale greets him as he always does. It's *Bucky* more often lately, *John* less so. John is usually reserved for their tender moments,

their serious moments, moments when Gale is fondly exasperated with him, and Bucky is ashamed of it, but he's been avoiding most of those moments these days. Gale's method of trying to act like nothing's changed, like this is just a new hurdle to jump and life is waiting for them where they left off isn't helping anyone. Bucky doesn't want to endure, he wants to *fucking go* and it makes him angry with Gale when he knows he shouldn't be, when he doesn't want to be.

He keeps staring at the fence until Gale moves his body between him and his view of the concertina wire. Bucky eyes the tower, notices the guard have shifted to look at them, Gale's a foot in front of his pile of rocks, but they quickly lose interest.

"I've got Jefferson working on the maps we talked about," Gale tells him.

Bucky scoffs, "So we can stare at them and imagine what it looks like out there. As if we're ever gonna use them."

He meets Gale's eyes, takes in the stubborn set of his jaw and the frustration in his eyes. He'd probably been wondering what version of Bucky he'd be getting today, and he looks disappointed with which one he found.

"You been out here long?" Gale asks him. He looks between Bucky and the fence but doesn't comment on it. They've had this discussion enough times and they're both tired of it.

"Was enjoying the solitude," Bucky tells him. "What about you, Buck, you have a productive morning?"

"Taught some calculus again," Gale tells him, and Bucky scoffs. Gale had stopped asking Bucky to join him for lessons months ago, and he can't blame him one bit.

"Trying to seize the only chance you'll probably ever get to be a teacher, Professor Cleven?" His words are cruel, and he's never been cruel to Gale, but he can't seem to stop them. Instead, he makes sure his words come out pointed and he watches them land as Gale's shoulder hitch up the slightest bit. He hates that he feels some satisfaction at the sight.

"Just trying to give the boys something else to think about," Gale doesn't take the bait.
"Something that might help them once they're back home."

Bucky resists the urge to challenge that and instead just shakes his head.

“And what’s next on your agenda?”

Gale’s posture is defensive, but his voice is still soft, still not harsh or cold like Bucky’s own.

“Going over to work on the stumps with the boys,” he answers.

“Not gonna ask me to join? These shoulders are still a hell of a lot stronger than those bony things, wasting away like you are,” he makes a gesture to Gale’s body, swallowed by the thickest wool coat Bucky could find him when he had noticed how deep the chill had settled into the smaller man’s bones. There’s a flare in his chest when the words leave his mouth, like a warning. Hurt flashes in Gale’s eyes, there and gone again in a blink.

“Would you come with me if I did?” Gale’s voice is lower now, shuffling his feet and no longer looking at Bucky.

“Nope,” Bucky pops the word of his mouth and watches as Gale nods, still not looking at him.

His next words are spoken to the ground, but Bucky hears them loud and clear.

“I know you’re hurting John, everyone in here is in their own way,” Gale starts, and Bucky clenches his jaw because they’ve had this conversation too and it just doesn’t help him, so what’s the point? “It’s okay that you’re feeling it differently, that it’s hitting you differently, no one’s going to judge you for it, ‘specially not me. I told you this version of you is the one worth knowing and I meant it.”

Bucky looks away to hide the stinging in his eyes. He doesn’t respond, isn’t sure what would come out of his mouth next if he did and thinks it’s probably best for the both of him if he lets the silence settle. Gale doesn’t wait for a response for long though and Bucky looks back at him as he begins again.

“I love every version of you,” Gale speaks those words to the ground, soft enough Bucky barely hears them. When those blue eyes finally meet his, Bucky feels his heart crack in his chest because they’re bright and hurt and *sad* and Bucky knows he caused it with his cruel words. “But stop trying to hurt me John, ‘cause I ain’t gonna hurt you back, no matter how much you think you want me to.”

He doesn't give him a chance to respond, which Bucky thinks is a wise move considering every word he's spoken to him today has been barbed. Bucky watches him walk away and tries to breathe through the shame in his chest, knows he should go after him, thinks he could fix it, decides he'll watch the fence a little longer and then go take a nap.

Bucky rolls over in his bunk as the door to their hut slams open, hitting the wall with a thud. He wasn't sure how long he'd been dozing; *he was never really sure of that these days.* He was fairly confident that the boys were only coming back from the daily line-up at the potato shack. They'd all returned from their manual labor and Bucky had ignored the glares sent his way when they'd seen him in his bunk. Some of the guys had looked at him with pity, and he'd rolled over, hating that more than the resentment.

He remembers a firm squeeze to his shoulder and a murmured "Be back with your chow in a bit, just rest John," in his favorite raspy voice and swears it was just moments ago. Guilt and resentment had kept him from acknowledging Gale. Returning to their broken-down hovel with their daily rations of rotten potatos and stale bread surely didn't warrant the chaos that interrupted Bucky's doze.

Bucky has been fading in and out this afternoon. More than he usually does. He doesn't know how best to describe it, and he wouldn't try to anyway, so he avoids thinking about it as best he can. Somedays he thinks maybe he should try to describe it to Gale. He might be a man of few words, but he hardly ever fails to say exactly what Bucky needs to hear, problem is lately he can't seem to do anything in the daylight hours with Gale other than belittle him.

Thinking of their interaction in the yard earlier makes guilt swell and he tries to avoid thinking of the hurt shining in his expressive eyes.

Every time he wants to finally open his mouth and unburden himself onto Gale, his gaze lingers on the dark bruises that seem to grow every day under his eyes. On the skin pulled taught on his pale cheeks, the bones beneath too visible as he somehow manages to lose weight and color faster than any other man in the Stalag.

In the end, each time, he refuses to become more of a burden to Gale. He won't add to the heavy load on his best friend's shoulders with his own issues, even though his current issues are preventing him from

helping to lessen the load like he usually would.

“What the *fuck* are we gonna do?” Bucky hears Crank’s words cut above the anxious chatter that filled the hut.

“I don’t know Crank! We sent a runner to get Colonel Alkire but what the hell is that gonna solve?” Benny’s voice, usually calm and reasonable, breaks out through the growing volume of voices in the small space and Bucky begins to gain momentum to sit up.

“Bucky, get the fuck up,” Brady’s uncharacteristically harsh tone almost stops Bucky in his tracks, but he manages to get to his feet as he finally looks around to observe the faces of the men around him. They all look some combination of angry and scared and none of them are carrying food. Bucky observes every face in the room, willing his sluggish mind to focus and noting that his favorite face of them all is missing, before turning to Brady.

“Where’s Buck?”

Brady shakes his head and turns away from Bucky, looking somehow both more angry and more scared than anyone else in the room and Bucky feels the fog lift from his brain as his heart starts to pound faster in his chest.

“Where the fuck is Buck?” Bucky questions the room. His gaze flicks over the faces of his men, watching as most of them shuffle their feet and avoid eye contact with him. He swears he can feel his blood cool in his veins as he takes a step forward and grabs Benny around his collar and pulls him forward.

“Where is he Benny?” Bucky shakes him, feeling more alive than he has since before he walked into that phone booth in London.

“They beat him,” Benny breathes out. “Then they took him to the cooler.”

Bucky drops his hands, releasing Benny’s jacket and stumbling back a step.

“What?” He can’t help but stare at Benny uncomprehendingly because Gale is a senior officer here. He goes to meetings with the Krauts and negotiates for supplies and he’s *fucking Gale.* Gentle, quiet, sweet Gale and how could anyone hurt him?

“For how long?” Bucky practically yells. *The cooler?* He thinks and

feels his heart sink. Gale can't go to solitary confinement, none of them can survive this place alone and Gale has been wasting away even in a room full of people who care about him.

Just don't leave me alone in here. I don't do well without you, John. Bucky feels his eyes heat as he remembers the quiet confession Gale had shared with him just a few weeks ago.

"Do we look like we speak German Bucky? We don't fucking know anything!" Crank snaps at him.

"Why?" He needs answers. Disrespecting the guards gets you thrown in the cooler. Trying to escape gets you thrown in the cooler and none of them are going anywhere without a plan and each other. Gale wouldn't do anything to get himself thrown into solitary, none of them would. *Except me,* Bucky thinks and then immediately feels shame.

Bucky reels back as every head in the room turns in the same direction at once and he follows their gaze, shocked when his eyes end up on Alex, leaning against the wall in the corner, gaze locked on the floorboards.

Silence envelops the room and Bucky takes a step towards him.

"I was working on the maps," Alex says, still staring at the floor. "I didn't see the Krauts coming, but Buck did." He sighs out a heavy breath, not raising his eyes to meet the stares of the rest of the men. "I think he came to fetch me for chow, I lose track of time in the library. He was waiting for me to put all my shit away and must have heard them coming. Pushed me right outta my chair and away from the desk so he was standing over my drawings when they came through the door."

Bucky glares at the other man, fists clenching at his sides. He feels a hand around his bicep and turns to meet Brady's stony gaze. It's enough to make him pause and take a breath. Gale would be disappointed in him if he punched another airman and he's disappointed Gale enough lately, he thinks.

"They hurt him?" Bucky grinds the words out, afraid of the answer.

"Yeah," Alex finally looks up and Bucky watches him swallow thickly before nodding. "Just grabbed him at first, until he fought back." He hears a few swears behind him and shares the sentiment, Alex hears them too. "Looked like instinct more than anything when they held

him down. He seemed to catch himself and stopped, so they did too after that. I don't think it was as bad as it could have been. Nothing life-threatening."

The words hang in the air and do nothing to ease the tension in the room.

Not life-threatening? Everything in this godforsaken place is life-threatening and now he's all alone, his mind spins.

Bucky feels like he's going to be sick. He can't stand seeing Gale hurt, but he's finding that knowing he is and not being able to see him is much worse.

"And what," Benny speaks up, "They just dragged him out the door?"

Alex eyes meet Bucky's for a moment, a flicker of something Bucky can't gauge there, before flicking over the rest of the room's occupants.

"They were speaking German mostly," Alex tells them. "But one of them made sure Gale understood him. Said, 'some time alone for you Major' and then they took him away. Seemed obvious to me what they meant but one of the goons kept me from following to watch him go in."

"We saw it," Crank spoke up, voice hard. "Guards had to hold us back, when we saw it was Buck they were pulling along. But Buck gave us that look, you know the one, and we backed off."

Bucky is both ashamed he'd be sleeping while this all went down and thankful for it. A look from Gale wouldn't have stopped Bucky if he'd seen him beaten and dragged away from him. He'd be lying dead in the dirt right now if he'd been a witness to it, that he's sure of. Gale would have never forgiven him for that.

"Tried to ask how long he was going in for," Crank continues, "But they all just shouted at us to stay back. So, we sent a runner to Colonel Alkire. Maybe he can get some answers."

"That RAF pilot that got caught digging a few months ago was in there for two weeks," Brady speaks the words quietly and Bucky's gut clenches. *That's too long, he can't last that long.*

"Well, it should be a shorter stint for Buck then, right?" Crank questions. "I mean, drawing a map isn't half as bad as digging a way

out."

"If they see it as him plotting an escape, it might not matter which one is worse," Benny reasons, the words coming out even though they can tell from his tone he doesn't want to say them. "Could be all the same to them."

Bucky finds himself staring at Gale's empty bunk, the discussion of the possible length of his isolation filtering in and out of his focus. More voices join the fray, but Bucky can't distinguish them as the bunkhouse inhabitants break into sub-groups to hypothesize how long *the love of his goddamn life*, the man he'd insulted and flung cruel words at just hours ago, is going to be stuck in a cold, tiny room all on his own. The noise of the chatter reminds him suddenly of their post-mission interrogations and he needs it all to stop.

Despite the cold, sweat has broken out on the back of his neck, and he can feel his chest tighten, panic ready to settle in, tries to shove it down. He tears his eyes away from Gale's bunk and the first face his gaze falls on belongs to Alex. Guilt and sympathy are warring expressions on the man's face as he looks back at him, but Bucky also sees that look in eyes from before, the one he couldn't read.

He needs to think, he needs to act, he needs to do something. And all he can think suddenly is *what would Gale do?*

At his very core, Gale was a leader, same as Bucky and leaders take care of their people. He doesn't want to and at the same time, he does. It's what he would have done without hesitation before he ended up here, before Gale didn't come home to him. It's what he'd always done, from the moment he became a Cadet, long before he ever pinned on a Lieutenant bar and had been told to lead.

But this place is eating away at him, and he isn't sure that the old him is still present anymore. He's been afraid that the old him might have died in the back of a wooden cart with another man's blood and brain matter in his mouth.

But acting can't be much different than singing and if he's loud and commits with enough enthusiasm, he thinks maybe he can get himself some place where he can fucking breathe.

"Alright, cut the chatter," he projects his voice, he's always been loud, but not in here, not in a while. A few of the men closest to him turn his way but most of the men continue to spiral in the conversations. So, he stands taller and takes a breath and lets it go.

“Hey! Shut the hell up!”

The silence that follows is jarring and having all eyes on him doesn’t thrill him the way it used to. He scans the faces of all the men in the room, lingers longer on Crank, Benny and Brady and has the realization that he hasn’t really *looked* at anyone, paid attention to anyone, other than Gale in a really long time. More guilt to add on to the growing pile, so he pushes it aside for now.

“This shit you’re doing,” Bucky gestures around the room. “Playing twenty questions when not one of you has any answers, isn’t fucking helping. It’s not helping Buck and it’s not helping you, so cut it out.”

He sees anger on some faces, Benny’s included, but he cuts them off before they can start back up.

“I want all of you outta here now,” he tells them and sees more anger. “There’s still a little time left to get chow and you skinny fucks can’t afford to miss a meal. No arguments.”

Whispers start up as some of the men murmur to each other, but no one makes a move.

“Bucky, they just took Buck to the Cooler and you want us to go eat our dinner?” Crank’s voice breaks through, full of disbelief.

Bucky’s heart pounds harder in his chest but he nods.

“That’s exactly what I want you to do,” he tells them all, trying to soften his gaze but not sure if he succeeds. “If Buck found out you all starved yourselves tonight because of him he’d tear you all a new one. Or worse, he’d tell you he was disappointed in you.” He feigns a shudder, and something stirs in his chest when it gains him a few chuckles.

“Boys, all there is to do is wait for Colonel Alkire right now,” he pushes. “You might as well do it with some rotten potatoes and turnips in your bellies.”

He sees the fight physically leave Benny and then the others. They start to shuffle to the door, prompted by Benny’s gruff, “He’s right boys, let’s go,” and he steps aside to let them pass. Most of them give him a grim smile or a head nod as they walk by, but he notices Brady keeps his eyes on the man in front of him.

Without thinking he reaches his hand out and wraps it around Brady’s

bicep. “Bring me back my ration or some bread, woulda Brady?”

He can’t tell if the surprise in Brady’s eyes is because he’s asking for food or because he reached out and spoke to him, but either way, it hurts. Everything hurts today.

“Sure, Major,” Brady says with a nod and Bucky releases his arm and sends him out the door with a squeeze to his shoulder.

Once Brady’s out the door, Bucky lets himself deflate a little, but he notices he isn’t alone and straightens back up. Macon and Daniels are standing in front of Alex, speaking to him in hushed tones.

“You fellas ain’t hungry?” Bucky interrupts, raising his eyebrows and gesturing to the open door.

“I need to talk to you for a minute,” Alex pushes away from his friends and comes to stand in front of Bucky. He looks to the other two and says pointedly, “Alone.”

“You sure?” Daniels asks him, eyeing Bucky and it makes him scoff.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” Bucky rolls his eyes.

“It’s fine,” Alex tells them, voice firm. “I’ll meet you in line.”

Macon and Daniels glare at Bucky until they’re out the door and then Bucky turns to Alex and crosses his arms.

“What?” His voice comes out harsh, even though he tries to stop it, but he’s on edge and trying to hang on.

Alex looks nervous but his shoulders are squared and he’s looking him in the eye. Bucky doesn’t think he’s looked this many people in the eye in weeks.

“Before they dragged him out,” Alex starts and Bucky braces himself, hoping something worse didn’t happen that Alex hadn’t wanted to share with the group. “He told me to tell you something.”

A breath escapes Bucky’s lungs, thankful it’s not more bad news.

“Well?” He pushes, eager for Gale’s words now that he knows they exist.

“Doesn’t really make sense to me,” Alex tells him, “But he sounded desperate, like it was important you get the message.”

Bucky's about to growl, impatient, but thankfully Alex continues.

"He said, 'Tell Bucky, after this next bit, I'll probably be thinking Hawaii,'" Alex tells him with a shrug and he looks apologetic, like he's thinking Gale's words mean nothing to Bucky, when he couldn't be more wrong.

A laugh breaks out of him, but it chokes into a sob, and he feels his eyes sting, so he closes them and tilts his face to the ceiling, trying to stop the inevitable.

"Uh," Alex clears his throat. "That makes sense to you?"

Bucky swallows thickly around nothing, willing his voice to come out even. The last time he spoke to Gale, he'd insulted him and implied he was weak, let him walk away hurt and then ignored him. And Gale took a beating and used his last opportunity to give Bucky hope. To let Bucky know he was thinking of him, of them and of their future together that he still believed in. *That self-sacrificing, kind, beautiful bastard.*

"Yeah, it does," he chokes out and looks at Alex, hopes the other man doesn't comment about the tears he can feel gathering in his eyes. "Thanks, Alex."

Alex gives him a look; another one he can't decipher.

"Go get food before they cut off the line," he grits out and Alex nods, turning towards the door.

"For what it's worth, if it's worth anything at all, I'm sorry about Buck," Alex tells him and Bucky knows he means it genuinely, but Bucky just needs him to get out right now.

He nods at him, and Alex finally walks out, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Bucky looks around the empty room and then shuffles on feet that feel like lead until he can rest his arms on Gale's empty bunk. His bunk that will stay empty tonight, and tomorrow and for days and maybe weeks. With shaking hands, he grabs the pillow that can't even be called a pillow anymore for how flat it is from the weight of holding both their heads every night.

Back hunched, chest pressed against the wooded bed frame, all his weight resting there, he shoves his face to Gale's pillow, breathes in

the scent of him, *of them*, and cries.

By the time the boys return with their daily rations, Bucky has himself composed. There are no tear tracks on his face, no wetness in his eyes. He still feels the bone-deep sadness in his core, made worse when some base part of his brain still expects Gale to walk through the door and is met with empty air behind the last man to enter. Some of the younger men exit the bunk room into the hallway, presumably to take the rations to their meager kitchen area to prepare the usual watered-down soup. Bucky still feels like he's hovering on the verge of being sick and hopes they take their time.

There is a subdued silence among the men, one that Bucky knows is steeped in worry and concern over their Major. For months he has been avoiding most people, avoiding the long, loud verbalization of his thoughts he was always known for. Right now, he has an urge to say something, to take the faraway looks out of the eyes of the men that used to look at him with admiration. But he knows he carries that faraway look too, that they've seen it in his eyes for months and he doesn't know what to say.

"The goons let you have my ration too, Brady?" Bucky asks, just to break the silence.

"They did," the young pilot nods. He seems surprised again at being addressed and the constant festering guilt churns in Bucky's stomach.

"Good lookin' out," Bucky gives him what he hopes resembles some kind of smile. He gets a shadow of one in return.

Most of the men situate themselves slowly, some sitting on the lower bunks, some around the small wooden table, some choosing to stand against the wall. At this time of night, they would typically be playing cards, reading or chatting while they wait for warm food to be ready. Tonight, they're silent and immobile, as if they're all waiting for something. The trouble is, Bucky realizes, the thought creeping up on him and making his stomach turn, that who they're waiting for is not coming back any time soon.

"Any of you see Colonel Alkire out there?" Bucky forces himself to ask, watching as most of the men shake their heads in response.

"No," Benny speaks up. "Must still be meeting with the Commandant. I'm sure we'd be his first stop when he learned something."

As if summoned by their restlessness and his name, there's a brief knock on the door to their hut before it swings open and Colonel Clark walks in followed by Colonel Alkire. They shut the door behind them and begin unwrapping their faces and heads from the wool they've got adorning their persons.

Some of the men have moved to stand, the reaction to a senior officer walking into the room still knit into their bones, despite the fact that they've been told not to stand on ceremony in their quarters. Bucky finds himself standing as well, though not out of respect or compulsion, but of eagerness.

Colonel Alkire is the senior officer in the South Compound they reside in, and he has the ear of the higher echelon German Soldiers leading the Stalag. Colonel Clark is the Senior Officer that oversees intelligence for the Americans imprisoned. If there are answers to be found about Gale, about how he is and about how long he'll be away, these are the men to provide them.

"Boys," Colonel Clark addresses the room, eyes scanning over all their faces. His eyes linger on Bucky's for a moment longer than the others, but Bucky can't read his expression. "Have a chance to eat?"

"We're heating it up now, Sir," one of the men that had exited into the hall earlier returns, the others following at his heels, empty handed but drawn by the noise of the newcomers.

The Colonel's look at each other and something unspoken passes between them. Bucky finds himself bracing himself internally and externally, one hand wrapping around the rough wood of the bunk he's leaning on, the other clenched at his side.

"We just got back from the Commandant's office," Colonel Alkire begins. "Went there as soon as the runner you sent found us."

All eyes are on the two men. They've gained the undivided attention of all twenty men and Bucky wonders if the rest of them are holding their breath or if it's just him.

"You all know the guards have been different ever since the mass execution of the RAF escapees, ever since the S.S. guards came into the picture," Colonel Alkire continues. "The Commandant insists he's still committed to sticking to his previous convictions, that he wants his men treated humanely in Allied Camps so he's doing his best to ensure our treatment is humane as well."

That prompts loud grumbling from the men around the room, but Bucky needs to hear what the Colonel has to say. He feels like he'll die if he doesn't so he stomps his foot and glares around the room.

"Let the man speak," he orders them, voice hard. Some mumbled, "Yes, Major" and "Yes, Sir," are given and he turns his focus back to their guests, both of whom are watching him with matching expressions of something akin to appreciation. Bucky figures it's been a while since they've seen Major Egan too.

"That all being said," Colonel Alkire speaks as if he was never interrupted. "They have no tolerance for escape attempts or anything they perceive as one. And the Commandant has decided that Major Cleven was in the early stages of plotting an escape and his start was map-making and reconnaissance." He looks tired, weary when he looks at Bucky, holding eye contact with him as he finishes with a grim sounding, "They've decided to make an example out of him."

"What does that mean?" Bucky grinds out, feeling light-headed. His grip on the bunk tightens.

"Standard punishment for any kind of escape attempt is ten-days in the Cooler," Colonel Clark joins the conversation. "They said to expect Major Cleven to be in their longer than that."

"He's a Major, a leader in here and he had a fucking pencil drawing of some hills and trees," Crank's angry voice cuts in before Bucky manages to work any words out around the tightness in his throat.

"That's why he's going to make it a harsher sentence," Colonel Clark explains. "If the men see that a Major gets treated this way for breaking the rules, they'll think twice about trying anything. That's their logic anyway."

"They murdered fifty British airmen months ago," Bucky scoffs. "And that hasn't stopped me or anyone else from planning every possible way out of here."

"We know that," Colonel Alkire steps back in. "And I'm sure a part of them knows it too. But that doesn't change the fact that Major Cleven is in for a rough few weeks."

Bucky can't stop the whining noise that climbs out of his throat, tries to turn it into more of a growl, but can't find it in himself to be embarrassed by whatever the men hear. Based on the devastated looks on their faces, they understand to an extent.

“Three weeks?” Bucky questions, willing his voice not to break. “Is that what they said, three weeks?”

There is sympathy in Colonel Clark’s eyes when they meet his. “He didn’t give a specific number, Major. He made a comment, said he hopes Major Cleven didn’t have plans for Christmas.”

Christmas. The word threatens Bucky’s composure because while he’s never been able to get him to vocalize it, he knows Gale loves Christmas. Remembers last Christmas when he’d had a nightmare and Gale had stroked his hair and hummed Christmas carols into his curls while he’d held him until he fell back asleep.

“Christmas is seventeen days away,” Brady’s quiet voice breaks in.

“That’s too fucking long,” Benny voices what they’re all thinking.

“Don’t spiral boys,” Colonel Alkire tells them firmly. “We’ll keep working on it, try to change their minds, but in the meantime, you all need to keep moving forward.”

Mumbled words and shuffling feet are the response he gets, everyone still processing the news.

“Did you get to see him?” Bucky asks.

“For a second,” Colonel Alkire tells him. “He looks a little worse for wear, won’t lie to ya. But he was standing tall, and he had a fire in his eyes, Bucky.”

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Bucky nods. Pride and sadness and longing an ugly mixture in his chest. He’s clinging to his self-control by his fingernails.

“Thanks for the update, Colonels,” he tells them, voice cold and a little distant, but thankfully steady. “Keep us posted if anything at all changes.”

Both men take it for the dismissal it is, and with promises to try again tomorrow and to keep them updated, they wrap up and head out the door. Silence envelops the hut in the wake of their departure. Bucky turns his back on the room, leaning against the bunk and closing his eyes, breathing deeply and trying to reign in the feelings surging within him like a storm.

There are eyes on him, he can feel them boring into his back and

wishes fiercely to be alone. Or to be alone with Gale. Wishes even more fiercely that he and Gale could switch places because he thinks the person he is now could handle solitary better than he could handle this. But he doesn't have that option and he has to make it to lights out before he can be alone with his thoughts. It takes more effort than he thinks it should, but he manages to straighten up, to square his shoulders and to turn around to face the rest of the men.

His eyes find the ones that had returned from the cooking area, and he clears his throat. "Potato soup isn't going to dish itself, let's get a move on." He keeps his tone light, but even and stern. The young officers only hesitate for a moment before shuffling back into the hallway.

"Bucky," Brady starts, but Bucky cuts him off with a shake of his head.

"Look, we're all exhausted, hungry and worked up," he looks at Brady before letting his gaze flicker across the rest of the faces, addressing them as a unit, because that's what they are. "We need to eat and get some sleep before we do anything else."

"What can we even do?" Benny's voice is pained.

"I don't know yet," Bucky admits. "But I just need some time to think, alright?"

He isn't sure why, but there is trust in the gazes of the men that look back at him. He thought he lost that a long time ago, between his refusal to help with the physical labor or the classes they started and the languishing, rotting in his bunk while the rest of them tried to fill their days with purpose. He doesn't understand why that trust is still there, but it makes something stir in his chest again, adding a good feeling to all the bad swimming around.

"Sure thing, Major," Brady speaks for the group.

Bucky gives him a small smile and a nod. The food is ready a few minutes later and it's consumed in silence. Bucky has to choke his down, his mind and his stomach and his body warring with each other. He pictures the look Gale would give him during dinner, the slight furrow in his brow, the worried press of his lips as he implored Bucky to eat, to live. It makes it easier and harder to choke down his portion.

There is no BBC broadcast tonight, no need to man the radio, nothing productive to be done. These were the evenings that Gale hated. He

didn't do well with idleness, with inactivity. He'd told Bucky once that being in this place was their next mission, that this was the thing they needed to survive now. And Gale's way of surviving was taking care of people, of things, of doing and doing and doing. Bucky hadn't seen it that way. Still doesn't. But the thought of Gale now sitting in a small, cold, dark room all alone with no purpose makes him want to cry again.

With nothing to do, he crawls into Gale's bunk, eager for the moment the windows are shuttered from the outside, and all eyes are closed, and none are on him. Half-formed thoughts of Gale try to filter through his mind and he pushes them away, waiting for the moment he is as alone as he can be to think them. He lets his mind wander until he hears the muffled German from outside. Moments later the window closest to his bunk is covered and darkness descends on the room. No one bothered to light the bulb in the center of the room tonight.

He jolts as a hand lands on the mattress near his pillow. He turns his head and is surprised to find Brady's face at the edge of his bunk.

"It's too cold to sleep alone, Bucky."

A smile pulls at Bucky's lips. Those exact words spoken softly from Gale's lips the moment the air had carried a slight chill on the breeze had ended with Gale in his arms, the other man's lips painting his neck in soft exhales, and Bucky finding peace for the first time since he left for London.

"Everyone has a buddy already Brady," Bucky tells him.

"We can fit three," Brady tells him. "Crank and I don't mind."

Bucky is touched. He is also not interested. He'd rather freeze to death alone than sleep cuddled next to two warm bodies while Gale freezes by himself somewhere. He decided the moment Gale kissed him for the first time that he would never sleep next to anyone but Gale again.

"Brady," Bucky locked eyes with him. He thought of the look Brady gave him when he told him why he wasn't wearing his sheepskin. Thought of Brady insisting he jump first. "I'm gonna keep the bed warm for when Buck gets back."

He watched Brady's eyes roam over his face, watched him swallow thickly, watched his eyes go soft and understanding.

“He’s gonna be okay,” Brady said, voice low and gentle.

“I know,” Bucky returned with a small smile. “Strongest man I know.”

Brady gave his shoulder a squeeze before walking away. Bucky rolled over to face the wall, ready for a moment alone, already shivering and dreading the cold night in front of him. A heavy weight was laid over him and he looked over his shoulder to see Brady walking away again. He reached up and rubbed his fingers over the new weight. Another wool blanket, same as the one he was already under. He moved his hand up over that and felt a thicker, warmer wool. The texture was familiar enough to him that Bucky didn’t need light to see the green heavy coat when he picked his head up.

Gale’s coat. He realized. The sun had been out and they’d all been out working up a sweat on stump duty all afternoon. He’d left his coat behind when he went to get their rations. Now it was a warm weight on Bucky, and it wasn’t on Gale.

Bucky feels his chest tighten as his fingers grip the thick wool. He racked his brain, trying to remember what Gale had been wearing when he’d left the room. But he had no memory of it because he’d refused to look at him when he’d given his shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

Did the German’s give him a coat? Did they give him a blanket? Did they give him dinner?

Does he have a light? Gale doesn’t like the dark. He’d confessed it once, implied that a common punishment in his youth had involved being left alone in the dark and had hated it ever since. He’d only ever spoken in vague terms of his childhood, but even the vaguest of terms allowed Bucky to paint an ugly picture clear in his mind. Did being stuck in the dark by himself like this remind him of those dark lonely days as a child?

They’d been each other’s solace when ugly memories surged in their minds since the war started. Sometimes they shared the darkness plaguing them to help lesson the load, more often they stubbornly kept their secrets, but they always, without fail, comforted each other through the moments. They were each other’s safe space and the thought that Gale was separated from him now left him feeling like a hole had formed in his heart and was growing by the minute.

The winter wind rattled the wooden walls of the hunt, the strength of it shaking the shutters and the auditory shriek of it grating on his

frayed nerves. The air outside his layers of wool was so cold he could see his breath, even in the dark. Shivers wrack his frame and he wonders if he'll sleep at all until after Christmas.

Gale ran cold. Bucky laid on his side and pulled his arms to his chest, eyes stinging when for the first time in weeks, a slender body wasn't pulled into his with the action. Gale didn't sleep well alone; he didn't sleep well without being in Bucky's arms or having Bucky in his.

Don't leave me alone in here, Gale had said, curled delicately in his embrace. He'd said it, begged it because he was worried Bucky would leave him, would do something reckless and get himself taken away from him. But now Gale is the one that's gone and he's all alone and Bucky can't fathom it. Trying to picture his Gale in a cold, dark cell, a cell he'll have to remain in for weeks. Injured and scared and alone, it makes his heart hurt and makes his brain buzz and he just wants it to be over.

None of their men, no one from the 100th has had a stint in solitary confinement. They'd all been told about it, warned about it. Colonel Clark made it clear when speaking of escape planning and reconnaissance that the most common consequence if they were caught conspiring would be time in the Cooler. But other than a vague understanding that it would be unpleasant to experience, Bucky had no direct knowledge to pull from, to imagine or understand what Gale would be going through.

Back in England, Gale had noticed that he'd been struggling. He'd asked him to go to London, to take a break, because he'd been worried about his mind. And Bucky had realized when they'd kissed that night, when they'd made love, that Gale had been right. The only things keeping him going at that point had been the original crews they flew in with, missions, and Gale. He'd gone to London, hoping Gale had been right and that a weekend away would fix him because he'd wanted to be better for Gale. He'd wanted to start this new phase of their life together without the anger and the resentment and the fear he constantly battled against.

But then Gale went and got himself shot out of the sky and then he followed him and then he'd experienced the worst humanity had to offer at the hands of German civilians and then they'd both been locked away and rendered useless to the war effort and he'd become someone he didn't recognize. Most days lately, he fantasizes about going over the fence. It would lead to a quick death or freedom and even though he won't often let himself think it, and he never says it

out loud, he was okay with either outcome.

But laying alone in Gale's bunk, worried and heartsick and cold, he has the overwhelming desire to see Gale on the shore of Lake Michigan. To watch him ride a horse. To cook him dinner and make fun of him for being good at baking. And he makes the decision that his next mission is going to be to do everything in his power to ensure that he has a future with Gale. He takes in a shuddering breath and lets it out slowly, willing himself not to cry because the tears would be too cold on his face.

Focusing on a mission always gave him direction and made him focus. Maybe it will be enough to keep the fog out of his mind, to stay in the present and stay away from the fence. He can't plan his mission without all the details though and with that thought, he knows what his first step needs to be. First thing tomorrow he needs to find the RAF pilot that had been in the Cooler and find out what he's dealing with, what *Gale* is dealing with.

He can't live in the unknown, not when it comes to Gale's wellbeing. No matter how unpleasant, how ugly the details might be, he'd learn them and he'd know them and he'd figure out what needed to be done for him. It pained him, made his stomach turn that his help would have to wait until after Gale had been through it, that he couldn't stop it or save him from the inevitable pain, that his role in this would be to deal with the fallout. But even when he doesn't recognize himself, the one thing about him that hasn't changed, that won't ever change, is that he loves Gale and he'll do anything for him.

He rolls over and swings quiet feet to the floor. A quick scan and a fumbling hand in the wooden locker next to the bunk reveals Gale's makeshift shaving kit. Bucky reaches into the bag, grabs the razor and climbs back into bed.

He swipes his palm over the wooden surface of the wall as he lays on his side. He pictures Gale's beautiful face, his soft sky-blue eyes, his plump lips. He pictures the bruises under his eyes, the scars on his cheeks, the ribs he could trace and feel under his fingers. He opens the razor and scratches one vertical line into the wall.

Night one without Gale in his arms.

How many more?

He closes the blade and stows it under the pillow, burrows his face into Gale's coat, closes his eyes and tries to will himself to sleep.

Images of Gale alone, curled into a ball, shivering in a cold dark room chase him into oblivion.

Bucky stands outside a hut identical to the one he and his men sleep in every night and waits impatiently. The RAF are housed in the Western and Eastern compounds, and they don't overlap in their day-to-day activities. They have separate facilities, cookhouses, libraries, makeshift baseball fields and Bucky can't recall having crossed paths with a single British Officer outside of the meetings he sometimes attended with the Colonels and Gale that the higher up RAF officers attended. Memories of angry pub nights, of the surprising moment of Gale wanting to fight, of Curt landing a one punch knock-out flood his mind and he can't say he's sorry about his lack of interaction.

Now, he's sought them out in order to learn what he can about the conditions Gale is facing. Worse, he forced himself to be vulnerable in front of them.

"He doesn't like to talk about it," an RAF Captain told him minutes ago. "Especially not with some American fly-boy stranger."

Bucky had gritted his teeth and forced himself to keep the ever-present bitter anger off his face. He *needed* to talk with Captain Hill.

"Look," Bucky had softened his voice, his posture. "My best friend was thrown in there yesterday and I got no idea what he's going through. Do you have a best friend in here? Maybe still out there somewhere?"

His questions had gained the reaction he was hoping for, a similar lowering of defenses from the British pilot.

"Then you understand," Bucky appealed to his sense of comradery, of brotherhood. "I need to know what to expect, to find out how I can help him once he's out."

He'd watched as the man had looked from him to the hut at the end of the row they were standing in and back. He'd watched his resolve crumble.

"Alright, follow me." He'd led Bucky along the dirt strip, dodging questioning glances the entire way. When they reached the hut, he'd be stopped and told to wait.

"I can't guarantee he'll want to talk to you," he'd been told. "He only

really talks to his buddies and he's still not doing real well."

Bucky had nodded and swallowed around the lump in his throat at that last statement because this man he was about to meet had been out of solitary for weeks. Two weeks in and three weeks out and he still "wasn't doing real well". He squared his shoulders and tried to push the worst-case scenarios out of his mind. He'd come here for facts, for details and that's what he would get.

He watches as a man walks out onto the porch steps and looks down at him. Bucky takes in the pale skin, paler than the man he'd just spoken to, the skin pulled taught on his cheek bones, the way his hair looks dull and so do his eyes. Bucky lifts a hand, giving a small wave and receives a slight nod in return. The man moves slowly and sits on the top step, wrapping his arms around his chest after gesturing for Bucky to join him.

Bucky's legs feel heavier than usual as he takes the rickety stairs up until he's able to sit down as well. He keeps a good distance between himself and the other man.

"Captain Hill?" Bucky starts.

"Yeah," the other man greets him with a nod. "They said you wanted to talk to me."

"I'm Major John Egan," Bucky tells him, surprising himself with the truth he hears in the words. "But everyone calls me Bucky."

"People just call me Hill," he gets in return and as Bucky watches him, he sees tremors in his shoulders, his back. His gloved fingers are tucked under his armpits and he's wearing more layers than Bucky himself, who is not shivering.

"They tell you what I wanted to talk to you about?"

"Yeah." Hill nods and keeps looking at nothing in the distance. "I don't like to talk about that."

Bucky takes a moment and forces himself to see a scared young man instead of an obstacle between him and helping Gale. *What would Gale do?* Filters through his mind and it almost makes him laugh. Because Gale was good with his men and great with Bucky but he was absolute shit with strangers. Talking to people was always Bucky's thing to shoulder in their partnership. Gale could do it, and always came through when he needed to, but he preferred to let Bucky do the

talking most often. *What would the old me do?*

“I get that,” Bucky makes sure his tone isn’t condescending or judgmental. “Bad shit happened to me too, before I arrived at this five-star establishment, and I don’t like to talk about any of it either.”

He can tell he’s got Hill’s attention at least.

“But I would,” Bucky continues. “If I knew it would help someone.”

“Even a stranger?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and finds that he means it. “We’re all in this hellhole together, might as well help each other where we can. And my best friend, who I’ve known since we were practically kids in flight school, needs my help. Your help.”

Hill nods once, and then nods again and sits up straighter.

“Okay,” he breathes out. “Just, ask me questions or whatever. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Bucky sits up straighter too, the questions he’d asked himself last night as he laid in bed without Gale passing quickly through his mind, making it hard to decide where to start. Before he can think much more, words blurt out of his mouth.

“Did they hurt you in there?”

He’s not even sure what he’s asking, but he needs to know if Gale is at least safe from the goons’ hands.

“Not physically,” Hill responds. “There were a couple that spoke English alright. They liked to taunt me through the door.”

Bucky can tell from his posture that he doesn’t want to elaborate, and he won’t ask him to. He just nods and files it away, tries to think practically.

“The food,” Bucky continues. “Same rations we get out here?”

“No,” He watches as Hill swallows thickly. “Bread only, once a day just before dark and a pint of water with it.”

He’s glad that Hill isn’t looking at him in this moment because he can’t school his expression at this news. They’re all dropping weight rapidly with the rations they’re given, even with the red cross rations

to supplement them. Bread isn't enough.

"That's it?" His voice doesn't give away his distress. "Just bread?"

"Some days, it was mostly mold. I tried to pick around it at first, but then I was so hungry I just ate it. Made me throw up though, which made it all worse." He finishes with a shrug.

Bucky doesn't know what to say to that, so he says nothing for a bit. A harsh cough breaks out of Hill and Bucky turns to him, sees him bending in on himself, coughing into his folded arms. The sound is terrible, Bucky is no doctor, but he can hear that it's in his chest, maybe his lungs even. He feels sweat gather on the back of his neck as he pictures Gale in front of him, slender frame wracked with barking coughs.

After a few minutes, the coughing subsides and Hill, who looked exhausted before, looks ready to keel over. Guilt wares with Bucky's desire to know, but he decides to push forward.

"You pick that up in there?" Bucky asks him.

"Yeah," Hill's voice is ragged, breathing heavier. "The bed isn't a bed, just a wooden plank with some straw in a sack. Gave me a blanket though. I can't describe the cold, no words for it. So don't ask. It was just really fucking cold."

Bucky nods along, hating what he's hearing. He can see that Hill is fading and he doesn't have enough information, but he can't think of what to ask. He's surprised when Hill starts speaking unprompted.

"The cell was as long as the bed and a little wider. Not enough room to even pace," Hill speaks to his own boots. "There was a window, a hole at the top of a wall. Small and too high up to ever touch. It lets in some sun during the day but nothing at night. There were no other lights. Dark was pitch black."

Bucky finds it easy to stay quiet, he finds he has nothing else to say in the face of Hill reliving memories he'd rather not just because he'd asked him to.

"It was so cold that our doc isn't sure I'll be able to use all my fingers again," Hill finally looks at him. He still hasn't removed his gloved hands from under his armpits. "I lost enough weight, they're worried about my heart, I think. I thought I was going crazy just being in here, but being in *there,* it sent me over the edge. I don't know how you can

help your friend because nothing really helped me."

Gale's not you, Bucky thinks. *He's stronger than you and you didn't have a me waiting for you when you got out.*

Despite that conviction, the absolute truth he knows, that Gale is the strongest man in here, his thoughts are spiraling, and he feels his heart plummeting. Frostbite and heart problems aren't issues that Bucky can fix with soft words and physical affection. He's going to need help and he's going to need a plan. He'd decided last night that this was his next mission, ensuring that Gale had a future and that he'd be there with him to see it, to live it.

He can picture the smile that would turn one side of Gale's mouth up if he heard that. Can picture his smooth, low voice as he says, "Finally decided to get outta that head of yours and include yourself in this future of ours?"

And Bucky wishes he was really here to say it, because he'd pull him close if he was and say, "Yeah, where will we go?"

But Bucky looks over at Hill, pictures Gale in his place and knows that he has a lot of work to do. He can't start his mission by getting miserably stuck in thoughts of worst-case scenarios.

"Thank you," Bucky tells Hill sincerely. "I know you didn't even want to talk to me, and I appreciate it. This all helps a lot."

The laugh that sounds from the man next to him is self-deprecating. "Hearing that your buddy is about to have the worst experience of his life helps you?

Bucky thinks about that for a moment. He knows that Gale is going to be miserable and in very real danger. He's going to be in pain and scared. But Bucky is sure that Gale knew the outcome of taking credit for Alex's drawings was most likely this one and he'd done it without hesitation. He's willing to bet that Gale would consider watching forts fall out of the sky around him a worse experience. He'd probably consider the week between Brady arriving at the Stalag gates and Bucky arriving a worse experience. He'd probably consider watching Bucky writhe in pain from his busted eye socket, concussion and fever a worse experience.

Gale won't see it as the worst thing that's ever happened to him because in his mind, at least it happened only to him. He and Bucky are a lot alike in that way. They're both always the first to put

themselves last, to put everyone else first. It's one of the first things that bonded them together. Bucky just never realized how hard it was to accept when Gale pulled their usual move *without him.*

"Hearing the facts about what he's going to go through from someone who went through it," Bucky continues, "That helps me. I needed facts. I don't have as many what-ifs in my head now. Those were driving me crazier than I already am."

Hill nods slightly, still staring out at nothing.

"And I know what to plan for now. Gives me and my guys a good chance at making things better for him when he's out. When he's back with us."

Bucky has been struggling to hold onto the pieces of himself that make him who he is. He's been feeling angry, and hopeless and bitter and apathetic. But he wants to do better. Has to, for Gale and their boys.

Looking at Captain Hill sitting hunched over his own knees, looking despondent and dull, Bucky decides to just try. He's a Major, he's a leader, and he's a good one. He takes a chance and slowly, making sure Hill can see his hand coming, places it on the younger man's shoulder and squeezes.

"We might fly for different countries, but I imagine the bonds we form with our crews ain't different. And if your crew in there loves you even a fraction of how much Gale's men love him," Bucky tells him softly, smiling a reassuring thing when Hill meets his eyes, "Then I guarantee you that they're all in there wanting to help you in any way you need."

Hill's eyes get bright, and Bucky knows it's likely he'll start crying soon. He also knows that he won't want an American pilot to be his audience for it. He gives Hill's shoulder another squeeze before he stands and starts down the steps.

"Thank you, Major," Hill's quiet voice breaks out from behind him.

"You're gonna be alright," Bucky says over his shoulder and then walks away.

When he exits the RAF compound, he takes a loop around the makeshift baseball diamond and then another to give himself time to gather his thoughts. He tries to keep them practical, factual but

images of Gale's pale face keep sneaking in.

After a dozen laps around the field, he decides to head for their barracks. He'd promised the boys he'd have a plan if they gave him time to think and he owes it to them not to keep them waiting any longer. He's got the beginning stages of a plan in his head, but he thinks that maybe it's time to start being part of a team again.

Bucky decides to lay it all out for the men in their bunkhouse. He sends Crank and Alex to gather everyone, and despite it being the time of the day that most men are strewn about camp finding way to break the monotony, it takes less time than Bucky expects for all of their huts occupants to be waiting in front of him with expectant looks.

He rips off the band aid quickly with a brusque, "I don't have any new information about Gale or how long the Krauts are going to keep him."

It's met with grumbles of disappointment, but Bucky expected that.

"Where'd you go off to so early then?" Benny asks.

"To the West compound," Bucky tells them all. "I spoke with the RAF pilot that Brady mentioned yesterday. The one that did time in the Cooler."

Understanding dawns on the faces of the men in front of him.

"What are we looking at, Bucky?" Crank, always straightforward when he needs to be, asks.

"Nothing good boys," Bucky tells them honestly, watching as they nod. He feels pride well in his chest when he notices that while his words clearly hurt to hear, they all look determined.

So, Bucky tells them everything he learned from his chat with Captain Hill this morning. He doesn't pull his punches, doesn't try to soften the worst-case scenarios Gale could be facing when he gets out. He feels a flare of guilt, knowing that Gale wouldn't want the boys worrying over him. He feels like he's betraying Gale somehow by sharing what he's going through, even though he learned it all from a third-party and Gale has no idea he did it. But the cold reality of it is that they're in a German Stalag, with trigger-happy guards and despite Bucky's newfound conviction to live well beyond this, to be free and happy

with Gale, anything could happen in three weeks. And if there is a chance that something might happen to him between now and when Gale gets out, he needs to make sure someone will be there to take care of him. And having *twenty* someone's, will make it impossible for even someone as stubborn as Gale to escape that care.

Benny looks sick when he finishes telling them everything. Looking around, Bucky sees the feeling is shared amongst many of the men. Crank and Brady still hold their fierce determination despite the concern in their eyes. Bucky understands better than they know.

"We need to start hording gentlemen," Bucky tells them. "Doc Miller mentioned when we got here that a calorie deficit is one of our biggest threats in here. And Buck is going to have one helluva calorie deficit for the next three weeks."

Bucky is pleased when his statement is met with agreement and is followed by a collaborative discussion around the room.

"We've already been saving some non-perishables from the Red Cross packages. We've got a decent stockpile."

"He's going to need nutrients. Man isn't supposed to life off bread."

"There's raisins and condensed milk."

"That last Red Cross drop even had some tuna and jam!"

For the first time since they'd burst through in a panic after watching Gale get dragged away, there is hope in the men around Bucky. Giving himself a mission lit a fire in his own belly, cleared the fog in his brain away enough to function. Seems it did the same thing for his crew. The men continue to throw out plans and ideas for long enough that Bucky knows they're getting close to ration line-up time.

"Bucky," Brady addresses him, bringing the attention back to him for the first time since he'd kicked off the impromptu planning period. "When I had that chest cold last year, Doc Miller got his hands on some Vitamin C tablets. They helped a lot. At least it seems like they did. Think he could get some more?"

Bucky remembers that horrible time, when everyone seemed to have come down with some kind of bug. Brady had gotten hit the hardest and they'd been worried about his chances due to the lack of medicine. It had been a bitter pill to swallow that they were just meant to endure, with no hope of affecting their own outcome. The

fog had grown heavier in Bucky's mind after that.

"That's a great idea, Brady," he praises the younger man. "I planned on talking to Doc Miller anyway. Figured he'd have some advice on what to expect. I'll ask him if he can scrounge some up again."

Brady looks pleased, even ducks his head a little and Bucky smiles at him.

"He's gonna need warmer clothes and we need more blankets," Bucky says. "I'm gonna hit up the Foodaco soon. See if they have anything that will help Buck."

"What do you have to swap though? We need all the stuff we've horded for Buck and ourselves already," Crank asks.

"Buck's always telling me I need to quit smoking," Bucky smiles. "Considering cigarettes are like gold at the swap shop, figure now's a good time to start."

Some of the younger guys look at him in disbelief. The ones he knows well, the ones that have known him and Gale as Buck and Bucky for many years, look fond.

"Buck won't believe it," Crank laughs.

"Yes, he will," Benny returns, and his smile is soft.

"I've got some too."

"Me too!"

"Yeah, got enough to spare for sure."

Bucky feels emotional all of a sudden. Cigarettes are hard to come by and they're revered here. The willingness of everyone to give up a comfort item in a place where comfort is so hard to come by for Gale's sake warms Bucky inside.

"Hold your horses," Bucky shakes his head. "I'll pay them a visit and see what they even have that we may need. I'll let you know if I need help footin' the bill."

"Let's take an inventory of what we have," Benny suggests. "We're supposed to be getting another Red Cross delivery any day now. Let's see where we're lacking."

Bucky watches as Benny leads the men through the task of slowly going through the hideaway areas of their hut. He feels better now that they've got a place to start. He knew he could count on them all to help, but it didn't stop the doubt from creeping into his mind on his walk over from the field. He'd practically been MIA from everyone but Gale for months and he'd worried that it would be more of a fight to get them to help him. Watching them all work together now, all he feels is foolish for even thinking it. They'd do anything for Gale, no matter who it was asking. And he's starting to realize that maybe he'd been wrong in thinking that they were all growing to hate him as he struggled. Based on everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, he's starting to realize that his mind might have twisted him up and mistaken their worry for anger and resentment.

Movement out the window draws his eye and he sees men gathering and heading in the direction of the potato shack. He closes his eyes for a moment as his mind conjures up imagines of Gale being beaten and dragged away. It had been happening at this time, just yesterday while he'd been laying in his bunk. His whole world changed in the span of a day.

He wonders how Gale is doing, wonders if he's thinking about him too. Knows deep down, no ego necessary, that he is. He knows Gale will be thinking about him for the length of his stay in that hellhole and Bucky hopes he created enough good memories with him to fill his daydreams and his evening ones. Hopes he pictures them falling in love and pictures the future Bucky is determined for them to have. Hopes Gale won't spiral and think about Bucky's cruel words yesterday. Hopes he isn't spending his time worrying that Bucky already headed for the fence without Gale being there to stop him.

When he opens his eyes, Alex is watching him. That familiar look of sympathy and guilt in his eyes. Bucky knows he'll have to talk to him. It's most definitely what Gale would want him to do. He's just not ready for it yet.

"Boys," Bucky raises his voice enough to be heard over the chatter. "Ration time. We've got a good start going. Go grab what they give you and let's eat. We'll keep brainstorming after we've got some food in our stomachs."

Unlike yesterday, his order to leave the barracks and to get in line for food is met with no resistance. It feels good to have a little authority back, no matter how trivial of a situation it is to exercise it in.

Brady stops in front of him as the men file outside.

“You gonna join us this time, or do you want me to grab yours again?”

Bucky thinks about the emotional storm he’d been in at this time yesterday, thinks about crying into Gale’s pillow. He’s trying to be better today.

“I’ll get my own today, thanks.” He claps Brady on the shoulder and motions him through the door. “After you.”

Brady’s eyes narrow at his words and Bucky sees his eyes cloud with something he doesn’t understand before it’s gone again, and Brady is giving him a small smile.

“Good to have you back with us, Major.”

Bucky has the thought that he’s been called ‘Major’ more times in the last twenty-four hours than he has been in a year. He swallows around the lump in his throat and follows Brady through the door.

When they all finally settle in for bed that evening, Bucky is exhausted. Thoughts of all of the possible nightmare possibilities of what Gale would be going through had plagued him last night and by the time he’d finally fallen asleep, it was restless and troubled. It had been his first night without Gale’s warmth next to him since Summer and it made it almost unbearably difficult to truly rest without him near. He tries his best to shut his brain down tonight. He thinks about his plans for tomorrow, about the plans they made tonight and tries to push everything else from his mind.

He pulls out Gale’s razor and adds a line into the wood next to the one he’d drawn last night. He traces his fingers over the two of them and closes his eyes, wishing there were enough lines drawn that it meant he’d roll over and be in Gale’s arms.

He pictures Gale standing on the beach in Hawaii, the tide coming up to cover his feet, his skin tanned, lean muscles on display and not one rib visible. He smiles into his pillow and the image in his mind changes a little, the sky is less blue, the sand less white, the water darker. Gale’s standing on the shore of Lake Michigan, seeing Bucky’s home for the first time. Sleep sinks it hooks into him and Bucky hopes the mental image will follow him into his dreams.

Bucky finds Doc Miller first thing in the morning. Doc Miller is a tall, bulky man. Older than Bucky by a few good years and built like he was meant to be a manual laborer or a farmer. He is a Flight Surgeon that had been on a mission as an observer. His intention had been to see what it was like, what these boys went through up in the air, so that he could better understand how to treat what was ailing so many mentally.

He didn't believe in the term Flak-Happy. He believed that they were all traumatized and in need of care and he'd been shot out of the sky on his quest to help them. He had the respect of every person in the Stalag, including Bucky.

Bucky isn't sure he would have survived without him in his first few weeks at Camp. The Kraut doctors had given him some gauze and sent him on his way. Doc Miller had patched him up and then given Gale all the instructions he needed to nurse him back to health. And nurse him Gale had. He'd been downright sweet with his bedside vigil. Bucky planned to return the favor soon.

Doc Miller confirms Bucky's fears. The worst things they need to worry about are frostbite, malnutrition and starvation. He praises Bucky for having the foresight to make preparations for Gale, for what he'll need and agrees to come up with a treatment plan for handling the worst-case scenario.

"Hopefully, he'll come out cold and undernourished, a little worse for wear and nothing more," he tells Bucky, though he doesn't sound optimistic. "I'll gather what I can in the next couple weeks. There's a Kraut Surgeon that is more sympathetic than the others. I know I can get more Vitamin C tablets. I'll see what else I can get my hands on."

"Thanks Doc," Bucky tells him.

"Sure thing, Major."

The Doc goes to walk away, Bucky's sure he's busy. There's one of him and thousands of them. But Bucky stops him with a hastily shouted, "Doc, Wait!"

Doc Miller turns back to him, expression open in that way Doctor's always manage and Bucky is suddenly afraid to speak. Afraid of the answer his question could lead to.

“What is it, Bucky?”

He told himself he needed to know everything in order to prepare for this mission. He needs to know this, even if he doesn’t want to.

“The RAF pilot, Captain Hill,” Bucky starts. “He said they had a doctor over there. Said that they were worried about his heart, because of how much weight he lost.”

Bucky stops there. Finds that he can’t get the question out. He can’t ask if Gale’s decision to save Alex from punishment, if him getting thrown in solitary could potentially ruin their future together. If somehow, they could get out of here and then Gale could keel over from a heart attack on the shore of Lake Michigan.

Doc Miller’s brow furrows and then his eyes widen slightly. The look he gives Bucky next is gentle as understanding dawns on his face.

“Issues with the heart are always a concern with extreme weight loss,” he begins, and his words make Bucky’s own heart pound. “But them developing because of a three-week period of duress would be unlikely.”

Relief floods Bucky and it must show on his face because Doc Miller is quick to cut off his hope with a dose of reality.

“I’ll be honest Bucky,” he continues seriously. “With the calorie deficit and the lack of real nutrients in our diets, prolonged malnutrition, well long-term health concerns, like heart issues, could be a very real factor. For all of us. Some men have less wight to lose than others, some have underlying conditions already that could make them fare worse. But the heart is a muscle and we’re losing muscle mass. It can happen in there too after too long under these conditions.”

Bucky takes it in and tries to come to terms with it. The fact that even if they escape, or if the war ends and they get liberated, they all might be dealing with more than just the mental anguish their time in this place no doubt will cause them. That it could rob them of their futures even when they’re free seems like a cruel twist of fate.

“It’s not something we can do anything about in our current circumstance,” Doc Miller continues. “The best thing we can do is eat what we can and pray those Red Cross packages don’t stop. Or that the Krauts don’t steal everything out of them when they come.”

“I’ll just keep this bit of our conversation between us,” Bucky aims for

light-hearted, but knows he falls flat. “The men have enough to worry about without adding potential heart attacks to the list.”

He can tell the Doc agrees with him and he knows he has other people to see today, but he can’t leave it there.

“Look, I told myself I was going to get Buck through this,” Bucky goes for the direct approach. “He’s always been on the slimmer side, you know? And he seemed to be dropping weight faster than me, faster than the rest of us. And now this shit.”

Doc Miller nods along, that same understanding look on his face. Bucky imagines he has good bedside-manner.

“I’ll be paranoid about it,” Bucky says. “Just, is there something I can watch for? Something that would let me know somethings wrong with his heart?”

“It’s unlikely to happen that way,” Doc Miller insists again, but Bucky gives him his most pleading look and he relents. “But early signs of a weakened heart would be shortness of breath, swelling in his feet or ankles, chest pain and a too fast heartbeat.”

Bucky repeats them all in his head once, twice, and a third time until they’re ingrained there.

“But I really don’t want you worrying about that, Bucky,” he’s told. “You’ll have enough issues to help fix that will be entirely visible if you’re determined to help care for him and it won’t help you to dwell on one that might not exist.”

“I’m not going to ‘*help care for him’*,” Bucky practically spits. “*I’m* going to care for him, and everyone else will be the helping hands. Helping *me* do it.”

Doc Miller doesn’t look surprised by his outburst, but that makes one of them because Bucky is. He thought he had the anger reigned in, pushed aside for now. He isn’t even really sure what prompted it this time.

“I understand, Major,” Doc Miller placates him. “We’ll help you, and Buck, anyway we can. Just make sure you’re taking care of yourself in the meantime.”

With that, he turns and walks away, and Bucky doesn’t stop him this time. He feels better and worse and wishes he could feel nothing at all

for a little bit.

When he gets back to the barracks, Crank lets him know that Colonel Alkire came by to let them know he hadn't gotten anywhere with the Commandant.

"Don't expect him out until after Christmas, he said." Crank's voice is filled with disappointment and Bucky gives a jerky nod and gathers his things to go have a quick wash.

He misses Gale's presence at his shoulder as he swipes a rag under his armpits. He can feel the fog wanting to creep back into his head. He wants to go lay down and try again tomorrow.

But he gets back, and he eats a meager dinner, and he hears that no Red Cross parcels arrived and then he tells the men some of what Doc Miller said and he learns that Brady managed to get a can of peaches from another bunkhouse. Apparently from a man that Gale had met on the train here and had helped walk in on a broken ankle.

Inspiring good deeds with his kindness, his Gale. It almost makes him smile.

He goes to bed that night and scratches a third line next to the previous two. He stares at them, mind blank until he falls into a restless sleep.

The next day feels mundane. He goes through the motions, gets water, gets rations.

He stops by the Foodaco and learns that there's a long, thick wool sweater, socks and a blanket that he can swap for every cigarette he has, plus some more. He's about to ask the men for some to spare but before he can, Alex approaches him with a box with more than what he already has and extra.

"What's this?"

"Take it," Alex tells him. "Daniels, Macon and I. We don't need 'em."

"How the hell do you have that many?" Bucky gapes.

"It's what they pay me for the pin-up girl drawings I make for them." Alex tells him with a shrug.

“I’ll give mine and just take some of yours,” Bucky tells him.

“Please,” Alex pushes the box into his hands. “Just take it.”

Bucky sees the ever-present guilt in his eyes and nods.

“Alright,” he takes the box. “But I’m telling Buck it’s your fault I haven’t kicked the nasty habit yet.” He points a finger at Alex and is relieved when it earns him a chuckle.

He gets the sweater and the socks and the blanket and stows them away. He doesn’t bother using them as he shivers in Gale’s bunk that night and scratches a fourth line into the wall.

The following night there is a BBC Broadcast and there is excitement in the room again. They’re all gathered around the table, radio ready. Bucky leans against Gale’s bunk, waiting as well.

He notices the headphone for the radio is laying on the table, not in Gale’s hands. Not in anyone’s hands.

A few of the men are looking at it, but Crank, Brady, Benny and Alex are looking at him.

He takes a breath, walks over and takes Gale’s usual seat. The headphone feels heavy when he picks it up and he wants to put it into a more slender hand that isn’t here. But he makes it through the whole broadcast and is even happier at the end.

The Russians are making solid progress. He lets Colonel Clark know that and then he scratches a diagonal line through the four on the wall and goes to sleep.

The next few days pass by sluggishly. There is a storm raging outside. The wind is bitterly cold and the snowfall is so heavy it goes up to their knees when they walk to the potato shack and the library.

Bucky spends all his time consumed by worry for Gale. It was cold before, now it’s freezing. He can’t help but picture those strong, long yet almost delicate fingers turned white from the chill. He wakes up panting from a nightmare. He’d gone to grab Gale’s hand, just to hold it, but his own hand had wrapped around a fingerless stump.

After that, he stared at the eight lines scratched into the wall until the goons opened the shutters on their hut in the morning.

He finds Alex sitting alone in the library. When he looks over his shoulder, he sees that he's sketching a woman. Not his usual over-exaggerated busty women, but a real beautiful girl.

"Who commissioned that one?"

Alex looks up, startled by his presence. And Bucky thinks back to another day, over a week ago now, that he was so unaware of his surroundings, he'd left his maps strewn about in easy view of anyone coming in. He pushes the thought aside. He's forgiven him for the mistake, and he knows Gale would tell him there was nothing to forgive in the first place.

"No one, Major," Alex tells him, folding the paper up. "It's my girl back home."

"She's beautiful," Bucky replies with honesty and a smile.

Alex gives him a look, scrutinizing him. He must see that Bucky is being genuine because he relaxes after a moment.

"She is," he says, tucking the paper into his coat pocket.

Bucky walks to the shelf along the wall, he'd come in to find a book, something to help him kill time. He can feel Alex's eyes on him, but he keeps his back to him. He'd tried to engage with the other man a few times but was always brushed off. He wasn't going to push him.

After a few minutes of silence, Alex's voice breaks it. "You're really not sore at me?"

Bucky stops his hands from running along the book spines and turns around to face the younger man.

"I'm really not," Bucky tells him.

"But you wish Buck was here and I was in there instead."

He doesn't say it like a question, but Bucky answers it like he did.

"I don't," he shakes his head, surprised by the truth behind the words. "I wish Buck wasn't in there, but I don't wish you were.

Alex takes in his words and nods.

“I’m sorry,” Alex says.

“So you’ve said,” Bucky moves to sit across from at the table. “But you don’t have anything to be sorry for. You’re not responsible for Buck’s actions. But if it’s something you need to hear, you’re forgiven.”

The look Alex gives him is one rife with guilt and pleading.

“Buck was the first one that treated us like we were just pilots,” Alex tells him quietly. “Just the same as everybody else. He’s a good man.”

“He’s the best man I know.” The words leave Bucky’s mouth without hesitation. “There isn’t a cruel bone in his body. And he has this way about him. When he sees you, he really *sees you*. Makes you feel like the most important person in the world.”

Bucky knows his words are true. He makes Bucky feel that way every time he turns those blue eyes his way. Trouble is, no one ever really seems to see Gale.

“But you’re the only one that ever sees him, aren’t you? The only one he *lets* see him?”

Bucky wants to deny it. It’s too close to the truth they keep hidden for their own safety. But Alex is looking at him like he cares and there’s that ever-present guilt and sympathy still lingering and Bucky wonders if maybe he knows.

“The last time I spoke to Buck, I insulted one of the things he’s passionate about. I insulted him and I called him weak,” Bucky admits. “So, I get the guilt. I feel it too. But right now, I guarantee you that Buck is in there worrying about me and worrying about his men. And that includes you now.”

He watches Alex swallow and look away, but his eyes don’t stray for long before he’s looking back at Bucky.

“The best thing we can do for Buck is to be okay when he gets out. Show him that he didn’t fail us, ‘cause that’s what he’s thinking right now. We prove him wrong. That’s what you and me and everyone else needs to do for him.”

Alex nods, determination in his gaze.

Bucky stands to continue looking for his book.

“And if you can, pass the word around to try to find chocolate,” he tosses the thought over his shoulder.

“Chocolate, Major?”

“Yeah,” Bucky laughs. “That’s what would really help him. Buck loves sweets more than he loves me.”

He waits for a beat and then smiles when a laugh bursts out of Alex.

Another day he has to yell at Benny and Brady. They’re eating less, trying to save more for Gale and that just won’t do. Bucky explains to them that Gale would never forgive himself if something happened to them because of something they were trying to do for him.

He convinces them they have what they need and that they’re waiting on another Red Cross parcel. He tells them to take their smokes to the Foodaco if they really want to try for something extra.

Tells them if he catches them starving themselves again, he’ll kick their asses.

That same day, Crank and some of the younger boys are complaining about the Kriege Times newspaper that gets released weekly out of the North Compound.

“Same shit every week,” Crank blows out a breath and tosses the paper on the table. “And never any fucking sports.”

It makes Bucky think.

Bucky sits propped up in Gale’s bunk, paper and a pencil he borrowed from Alex resting against his knees on a book. He looks over at the wall where thirteen lines are scratched in the wall.

He thinks of Gale almost every minute of every day. Worries about him to the point it makes his stomach hurt constantly. Misses him so much he feels it like a physical weight pressing on his lungs.

But he’s doing what Gale would want him to do. He’s doing what he should do. To the best of his ability.

So he looks away from the scratches marking the number of nights since Gale was taken from him and continues writing the most detailed recounting of all nine innings of a ludicrous game of baseball between the pinstripes and the polka dots he made up in his head.

He submits it to the North Compound boys and it's published in the Kriege Times the next day.

Crank and the boys read it out loud multiple times and the whole bunk laughs so hard they get called out by the goons after lights out.

Bucky draws a fourteenth line and goes to sleep missing Gale.

The snow is too thick for pulling stumps, but Bucky had taken over for a few days before the snowfall and with that and the work Gale and the men did before, they have more than enough wood for cook fires. They have a separate stockpile laid out for when Gale comes back, so they can keep the fire going through the night for him.

That was Benny's idea and Bucky had hugged him for it.

The day before Christmas Eve, Bucky walks by the library and sees all of the men that usually attended Gale's calculus class sitting inside reading.

He walks inside, straight to the front of the class and teaches them about calculating baseball batting averages like he's a guest lecturer and it's a completely normal occurrence for him to interrupt.

He walks out just as abruptly, amused laughter in his wake.

On Christmas Eve, they rest. They play cards and tell stories and eat a little extra without breaking into the stash for Gale. He marks the seventeenth scratch into the wall while Benny starts doing his best Bing Crosby impression and he wonders if Gale knows that tomorrow is Christmas.

Bucky watches them all enjoy themselves from Gale's bunk, where he lays and decides to rot as a Christmas gift to himself.

Brady shakes him awake with a hand on his shoulder and a murmured "Merry Christmas, Bucky." He rolls over enough to give the man a

small smile in return, but he can't bring himself to share the sentiment. Nothing 'merry' about another day without Gale.

"You wanna come with us for water?" Brady asks him. Bucky looks beyond him and notices that they're the last two in the room. He's surprised he slept so late, so deep.

"Nah," Bucky returns. "Think I'm gonna stick in here for the day."

Brady takes a moment to assess him. Bucky watches his eye flit from his face to the wall behind him and he knows he's seeing his tally marks when understanding and sympathy make a home in his eyes as he looks back into Bucky's own.

"I think you're do for a lazy day, Major."

"Thanks, Brady." Bucky is touched enough by the younger man's empathy he can't find it in himself to be embarrassed.

"It's Christmas, Bucky," Brady squeezes his shoulder. "Any day now and we'll have him back."

"And I'm never letting him out of my sight again," Bucky says with a grin and Brady laughs. He just doesn't realize that Bucky isn't joking.

Once Brady leaves, Bucky rolls back over and pulls Gale's coat tighter around his shoulders. Thinking about Gale, waking up alone and miserable, possibly sick and freezing, on Christmas morning makes Bucky's chest tighten and his eyes sting. He lets out a breath that shudders on the exhale and closes his eyes. The lines on the wall are mocking him today. He doesn't know how many more he'll have to add and he's not sure he can handle it if he has to keep scratching them for much longer.

His control is slipping the longer Gale is kept away from him. He can't do this without him, doesn't want to even try. He's been trying so hard to stay present; to be the man the men need him to be, to be the Major again. It makes him appreciate Gale's strength more than he already had before. Gale did all this and made it look easy. Only Bucky knew it wasn't easy on him at all.

Deciding to give in to his desires, he doesn't fight the fog that creeps up on his brain. He lets it take over until he feels himself drifting off. He has the impossible thought just before he falls into oblivion, that maybe he'll get a true Christmas miracle and he can just stay asleep until Gale comes back to him.

He doesn't get his Christmas miracle, but he does manage to spend the remainder of the day and night undisturbed in his bunk. He has the feeling that he has Brady to thank for that. Moments of almost being jolted completely out of his haze, chased away by a quiet voice.

"Let him rest today."

"He's been burning it at both ends."

"It must be especially hard today without him."

He's not sure what he's done to earn Brady's support or what he's done that allows the men to follow the younger man's lead and give him his space, but he's grateful for it.

A new day dawns and Bucky rejoins the world. He spends the majority of the day checking and re-checking their food stores, organizing the materials he'd collected for Gale. The other men laugh at him as he spends the afternoon laundering the materials from Gale's bunk and making the bed look pristine when he's done.

Comments about him being a good housewife are thrown around and he meets them with the expected eyeroll, even as his insides warm at the thought of a future where he and Gale have a house somewhere to keep in order for each other.

He pokes fun at the boys as they inevitably follow his lead and tidy up their own bunks and continue on with the rest of the space.

There is a sense of optimism, of hope in the air now that Christmas has passed. As if that was the hurdle they needed to cross before Gale's return to them really started to feel like some inevitable event and not a distant, untouchable concept.

Once everything is in order, Bucky wanders out into the Camp and his mind wanders as his feet carry him seemingly of their own accord. He ends up within a stones throw of the building that houses the Cooler and just stops and stares at it.

He'd done this a few other times, but it had only made him feel worse, knowing that he could stand there all day and he wouldn't see Gale emerge. Now though, it's been long enough that he knows there is a tangible possibility that the door could open and his world could step through into the light.

He's not sure how long he stands outside it today, but by the time a hand lands on his shoulder and jolts him out of his stare, his feet are numb and his legs feel like jelly.

"Major," Colonel Clark's deep voice draws his attention away from the building. "It's almost lights out. Maybe tomorrow."

Bucky wants to argue. They already kept him for weeks. They kept him for Christmas. They need to *give him back.* But he doesn't argue and he's not sure what prompts him to say it, other than the fact that it's been on his mind all day, but he finds his mouth opening and the words tumble out, sounding pathetic to his own ears.

"His birthday is tomorrow."

"Well getting out of that icebox sounds like a pretty good birthday gift to me." The hand still on his shoulder squeezes.

"Buck always hated his birthday," Bucky says with a shrug. He gives the Colonel a nod and after glancing back at the building once last time, he turns away and makes his way back to the barracks.

That night after scratching his eighteenth line into the wall, he lays in bed, shivering too much to fall asleep yet and thinks. He thinks of the Nazi interrogator who had his file and knew too much about him. Knew too much about Gale.

They must have his file here too. Do they know tomorrow is his birthday? Are they going to keep him in there a day longer because of it? Thinking it will add to the cruelty of the situation to make the man turn twenty-six the same way they made him spend Christmas: alone, miserable, cold and hurt?

A deep melancholy settles in him at the thought. Sick and tired of people being cruel to the kindest man he's ever known, to the man he loves. And he can't do a damn thing about it. He falls into an uneasy sleep with the upsetting feeling that he'll be right back in this same position tomorrow, just staring at nineteen lines on the wall.

It occurs so suddenly that Bucky doesn't have time to process what is happening. He plans to be outside the building all day, but he'd woken with the urge to clean himself up, like he'd cleaned up their bunk, like the men had cleaned up their hut. He wants to look like himself, he realizes. If he's lucky and today is the day, he doesn't want

Gale to see his scraggly unshaven face or his dirt smudged skin.

He's got Gale's shaving kit and has just finished making sure the only hair remaining on his face is his signature mustache, now neatly trimmed, when Crank bursts through the door.

"Bucky!" Crank's practically panting, red in the face. "I think they're letting him out. There's a fuss on the end of the compound and Colonel Clark said to get you."

Bucky drops Gale's razor into the basin, shrugs on his coat and pushes Crank out of the way in his haste to get out the door. He takes long strides through the hallway, into their hut and then straight out the door without pausing to see if Crank is following him. He has to squint at the brightness of the sun reflecting off the heavy snow he trudges through as he quickens his pace as he nears the buildings.

The crowd forming in the yard is big, too big, Bucky realizes as he takes in the uneasy guards, dogs pulling their chains taught as they yell at the airmen to stay back. He sees the backs of Colonels Clark and Alkire through the crowd and pushes his way through until he's standing between them, knowing it's the best place for him to be. The goons wouldn't dare unleash their venom on the Colonels.

He looks briefly at Colonel Clark's profile, sees that he's staring steadfastly at the door Bucky had spent hours staring at yesterday.

"Ready to sing happy birthday?"

The worlds send a jolt of hope through Bucky, the longing, the need to see Gale making his knees feel weak. He'd tried his best to push it down, to not let it overwhelm him, but if this is it, if this is the moment, why push it away now?

"He's really getting out?"

Colonel Clark nods, "Got word an hour ago. Should be any minute now."

With that, Bucky turns his entire focus on the door, willing it to open. His heart is pounding in his chest, the noise of the men yelling, the guards yelling back, lost in the back of his mind somewhere. It feels like both an eternity and like no time at all before the door creeps open and several guard steps through.

Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay, repeats like a prayer in

Bucky's head and then finally, Gale is there in front of him.

He's got a guard on either side of him, a hand gripped around each bicep and Bucky watches as he stumbles through the open doorway. His head is down, chin almost to his chest as the guards pull him along a few feet. Bucky's aware that the crowd of airmen around them is cheering, hears a few shouts of "Buck!" from somewhere behind him, but his entire being is focused on Gale.

The guards on either side of him stop about twenty feet in front of where Bucky stands and abruptly release their hold on Gale's arms. Bucky watches as one of them leans in and says something that has Gale turning his head away from him. He watches as Gale sways a bit, unsteady on his feet but remains standing and as soon as the guards turn to walk away, he runs forward, closing the distance between them in seconds.

He pulls himself to a stop right in front of Gale, who still hasn't lifted his head, not wanting to startle him. But he needs to see his face, his eyes, needs to know he's okay.

"Buck?" Bucky's voice comes out soft, emotion thick in his throat. He clears it and tries again when Gale doesn't react. "Gale?"

This time, Bucky sees Gale's gloved fingers twitch in his direction and he turns his head just enough that he's suddenly blessed with the view of those beautiful blue eyes, red rimmed, swollen and squinting against the harsh sunlight.

"John," Gale breathes out, voice quiet and rough, almost a whisper. It's the best sound Bucky's heard in weeks. And now that he knows Gale is aware that it's him, that the hands about to grab him belong to someone that will only ever touch him with love, he has to hold him. Crowd be damned, Bucky closes the remaining distance between them and wraps both arms around Gale shoulders and back, letting one hand cradle the back of his head, and pulls the smaller man into him. Gale buries his face into his chest and after a moment, wraps his own trembling arms around Bucky's waist.

Bucky squeezes him, eyes closed, feeling too many things at once to really feel anything at all. He can feel the tremors running through Gale, full body shakes. He doesn't know if it's from the cold, or hunger, or pain, or simply from being outside and free. Bucky knows he's shaking a little as well, overwhelmed.

He hears Gale whisper his name again from where his head is tucked

below his chin and he leans down to better hear him. It's at that moment that his other senses return and he realizes that Gale absolutely *reeks*. Enough to make his eyes water, but not enough to make him let go. He doesn't want to draw attention to it, knows that Gale will be humiliated. He prides himself on cleanliness, on being neat and put together, even in here and Bucky hates everything about this.

Gale's voice breaks through his thoughts, but he's speaking too quietly to be heard. Bucky releases his hold on his head and leans back enough that he can see Gale's face. His skin is dirty and pale, patchy facial hair has grown over his chin and upper lip, the bags under his eyes are darker than he's ever seen them, and his cheekbones are sharp points, skin pulled taut against them. Bucky swallows the anger and resists the urge to run his fingers over his face. He's gotten away with an embrace that some could find too intimate for just two good friends, he won't push his luck any further in public.

Now out of his hold, Gale sways again and Bucky puts both hands on his shoulders.

"Buck," he speaks softly, as he watches the other man's eye dart around, taking in his surroundings and looking more overwhelmed by the second. "Let's get outta here, okay? Get you cleaned up a bit?"

He squeezes the shoulders under his hands, feeling bones and too little muscle. It draws Gale's gaze to Bucky's, and he has to school his expression when he sees the emotions clouding Gale's eyes.

"John," he says again, and while Bucky loves hearing his name come out of that mouth, he wants to hear more.

"Yeah, Buck?"

"Think I've got fleas." He sounds absolutely miserable and Bucky's heart breaks for him. He wants to kill every guard in this place, wants to burn it to the ground. But Gale doesn't need his anger. He needs the opposite from him.

"Well, that sounds awful," Bucky tells him, giving him a small smile that isn't returned. "We'll get that sorted, huh? What do you say we just head straight for the washroom, get you cleaned up?"

Gale watches him for a moment before he nods once. His eyes keep darting around, but they always return to Bucky's own, so he just keeps smiling at him, hoping to ease the fear he sees in those blue

eyes.

Without asking, Bucky slides to Gale's right side, pulls his arm over his shoulder and wraps his own around Gale's slim waist.

"We'll go slow," Bucky tells him. He takes a step and is pleased when Gale does the same. Bucky shortens his stride to accommodate Gale's stumbling steps and they make their way through the snow, heading back toward their end of camp.

Bucky sees that most of the crowd has been turned away and he thinks it's likely the Colonels doing. He looks up and sees all the guys from their barracks lingering. Crank, Benny and Brady out front, looking desperate to help. Gale has his face to the ground again and hasn't noticed them.

As they approach, Gale stumbles and Bucky adjusts his grip, taking more of his weight, wishing desperately that there was more weight to take.

"Boys," Bucky says once they're within earshot. "Can one of you run ahead, make sure the washroom is empty. Buck here is in desperate need of a scrub."

Crank and Brady both nod, looking eager for a task to complete. They take off immediately.

Benny looks pained. Bucky knows personally that the relationship between a pilot and their copilot is unique. Benny cares about Gale deeply and he clearly wants to help him. There's a primal part of Bucky that wants to pull Gale closer to him, get him away from everyone else. But Gale's steps are getting more unsteady, and he can feel his tremors increasing from the strain and the cold.

"Benny," Bucky says, pulling the man's gaze from Gale to himself. "Think you could help us out?" He tilts his head in the direction of Gale's other side and watches as Benny's face lights up and he jolts forward.

"Brace yourself Buck," Bucky ducks his head and speaks into Gale's ear. "Concerned co-pilot incoming, your three o'clock."

"Hey Buck," Benny greets softly when he approaches. He's gentle as he ducks under Gale's armpit and raises his arm over his shoulder. "Good to see you."

“Benny,” Gale’s rough voice greets back, but he turns his head in Bucky’s direction and leans away from the other man.

Bucky makes eye contact with Benny over Gale’s head, concern in both their eyes. Bucky sees the moment Benny gets a good whiff of their cargo, a grimace spanning his features, but thankfully he doesn’t comment.

With Benny’s help they make good progress and soon they’re at the stairs to their barracks. Gale lifts his head and eyes them warily, but he squares his shoulders and helps Bucky and Benny get him up and into the barracks.

Some of the men have returned and they sit up when they enter, but Bucky backs them off with a glare. Gale is too vulnerable right now. He doesn’t seem completely aware, seems overwhelmed and Bucky needs to get him sorted before Gale forces himself back into Major Cleven for everyone else’s benefit.

“Grab some clothes for him, wouldja Benny?” Bucky asks. “His stuff is in the locker and the new stuff I got is with it.”

Benny ducks out from under Gale’s arm and Bucky tightens his grip on the thin waist under his grip, pulling Gale closer and continuing into the hall toward the washroom. It is blessedly empty. He’s not sure where Crank and Brady disappeared to but doesn’t spare it much thought.

“Alright Buck,” he leans the man against the wall and slides out from under his arm. Gale’s gloved fingers grab his coat, grip strong. “Hey, I’m not going anywhere, alright? Just need both hands to help get you outta these rags.”

Gale releases his grip, though he seems reluctant to do so. His eyes lock onto Bucky’s, and he looks fragile. He looks weak, and Bucky knows he’s not, but he looks it right now. His eyes are glassy and he’s shaking and he’s dirty.

“John,” Gale’s voice comes out like a whine and Bucky moves forward and frames his slender face in both his hands. Gale closes his eyes and leans the weight of his head into Bucky’s hand, drawing in a shuddering breath as Bucky swipes his thumbs over too sharp cheek bones, over his swollen eye lids.

Bucky presses his forehead to Gale’s.

“You trying to get fleas too?” Gale’s quiet voice breaks the moment and Bucky can’t help but chuckle as he draws back a little. He eyes Gale’s hair, greasy and dirty and lifeless, and so unlike the usual soft strands that Bucky loves to run his hands through.

“You sure it’s not lice?” Bucky asks. “Lotta guys in here complain about lice.”

“Could be,” Gale shrugs. “Saw ‘em jump though.”

“Well,” Bucky leans forward again, pretending to peer into his hair, still holding his face between his palms. “We’ll just have to get the little critters outta there then. The only things allowed in this hair is your pomade and my hands.”

He kisses Gale’s forehead and then drops his hands to the lapels of the coat he’s got on. One he doesn’t recognize but is thankful he had.

“I missed you,” Gale breathes into the space between them. Shaking hands rise up to grip Bucky’s wrists and Bucky needs to get him clean and seen to and wrapped up and safe.

“I missed you too,” Bucky kisses his forehead one more time. “So goddamn much.”

A throat is cleared behind them and Bucky jerks his head around so fast he hears it crack. Gale releases his wrists and he lets his hands drop. Benny stands in the doorway, cheeks red, a bundle of clothes in his hand.

“Benny,” Bucky starts but the other man cuts him off.

“Got your things, Buck,” he says stepping into the room and holding out the clothes. Gale doesn’t move to take them, so Bucky does. “Do uh, do you need help?”

Bucky shakes his head, not sure what to say. He doesn’t know what Benny saw, or what he heard but he does know that he’s always been more careful than this. His emotions are frayed, and he can’t think straight now that Gale is back in front of him. But he knows he needs to do better than this or their lives are going to change for the worse.

“I’ve got it from here,” Bucky tells him. “He’ll be fresh as a daisy in no time.”

Benny looks between the two of them and Bucky isn’t sure what he

sees because Gale is still and silent behind him, but his eyes soften, and he smiles at them.

“Brady went to get Doc Miller,” Benny says and claps Bucky on the shoulder. “He’ll be waiting for you in the barracks when you’re done. I’ll drag the boys to the library until the Doc’s had a chance to look over his patient.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Gale finally speaks up. “Kick them out, I mean.”

Bucky turns to Gale and reaches back out, hand going to his shoulder. He ducks his head to meet Gale’s tired eyes. “Do you want an audience while the Doc checks you out? Cause the Doc checking you out is nonnegotiable, but the audience part isn’t.”

Gale looks between them both for a moment before he shakes his head. “Just you, Bucky.”

Bucky watches surprise flit over Benny’s features at Gale’s admission and Bucky doesn’t blame him, surprised himself given the audience.

“That’s settled then,” Benny answers without missing a beat. “We’ll see you when you’re all clean and patched up.” And with that he walks out the door and they’re alone again.

“Sorry,” Gale mutters.

“Don’t apologize,” Bucky admonishes. “Now get undressed while I get the shower ready. It’s gonna be cold and you’re pretty ripe but we’ll go as fast as we can.”

Gale is losing steam. By the time they get him undressed and under the shower head, he’s so unsteady on his feet that Bucky isn’t sure he’ll be able to stand long enough to get clean. He’s gritting his teeth so hard as he takes in Gale newly revealed naked body, he’s surprised his jaw doesn’t crack under the pressure. He can count each one of his ribs, his hipbones are prominent, there’s faint bruising over his left side.

“Goons cracked a rib in the library the day they took me in,” Gale tells him, having caught him staring. “And they weren’t too keen on feeding me much. Bet I’m a sight for sore eyes, huh?”

Bucky looks back up at his face and sees that despite the joking tone, Gale looks embarrassed, ashamed even. Bucky cups his jaw again and

shakes his head.

“You look like the strongest man I know,” Bucky tells him seriously. “And you’re still the prettiest damn thing I’ve ever seen.”

Pale cheeks bloom red and Bucky smiles, leans in and kisses one and then the other.

He grabs Gale’s wrists and guides his hands to his own shoulders, giving him something to hold. The relief that hits him when he feels strength in those newly bared fingers, doesn’t see any discoloration, almost makes his own knees weak.

He’s quick but proficient in scrubbing the other man, maneuvering him so he can get every bit of him. It’s intimate in a new way and Bucky feels proud that Gale lets him do it. He spends extra time on his hair, soaping it twice and feeling dismayed when halfway through the second wash a bug jumps onto his hand.

He shakes it off and shuts the water off, grabs a towel and wraps it around Gale’s shoulders. He grabs another and starts rubbing it over his hair. When he pulls it away, he can’t help but grin at the mess he’s made of it.

“Good as new,” Bucky says.

“Hardly,” Gale shakes his head. He releases his hold Bucky’s shoulders and grabs the towel that’s draped over him, starting to dry himself. His body jolts suddenly, a raw sound choking out of him, and he hunches over as chest deep coughs rattle out of him. Bucky’s hands go to his back, rubbing circles until the fit subsides. The muscles under his palms are quivering. His whole body is shivering from the cold.

“You’re sick,” Bucky’s states when Gale straightens, feeling like an idiot for being surprised. They dodged frostbitten fingers; he’d hoped maybe they’d dodged it all.

“I’m alright,” Gale’s voice is rougher than before. “Just a cough.”

“You’re not alright,” Bucky feels his throat tighten. Gale’s wide blue eyes meet his and they’re brighter than before, watering from the force of the coughing fit.

“Okay, I’m not,” Gale admits quietly. “But maybe I will be.”

“Maybe?” Bucky reels back. “No *maybe* about it.” His voice is hard,

angry but Gale just keeps looking at him with sad eyes.

“Won’t much matter if the goons decide it’s time to march in a day or two.” Gale’s voice is almost apathetic, unlike himself. “I think if I try to bend over to dry off my legs, I might fall over. Not really up for a long walk through the German countryside.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Bucky tells him firmly. “We’re not going to talk about that.”

Bucky has spent every day since he talked to Captain Hill pushing these exact thoughts, these exact fears from his mind. He couldn’t afford to think about that what-if. He just needed to get Gale some strength back. Enough that if they get the order to march, he can make it. Because he has to make it.

“Alright,” Gale sighs, but his eyes soften. “We won’t talk about that.”

Bucky crouches down at Gale’s feet and takes the towel to the rest of his body. He gathers the clothes Benny brought, satisfied with the wool socks, pants, long sleeve under shirt and the sweater Bucky had traded the cigarettes for. They work in tandem to get Gale dressed and when they’re done, Gale is practically panting.

Concern rips through Bucky, but he moves forward and resumes his previous position under Gale’s arm and guides him back out into the hallway.

“You tell Doc Miller the truth,” Bucky says to him. “No stoic bullshit.”

“Bucky,” Gale sounds exhausted, but Bucky knows they need to get through this step.

“I need you to be okay, Gale.”

“Okay, John.”

Bucky leaves Gale slumped in a chair at the table, sipping water and nibbling at a tin can of raisins. He walks Doc Miller out onto the porch.

“Well,” Bucky implores as he shuts the door behind them.

“I told Gale everything already,” the Doc tells him. “And last I checked you were standing right next to him.”

Bucky keeps staring at him for long enough that he sighs.

“All things considered, he’s lucky. We need to keep an eye on that cough, make sure it doesn’t become pneumonia. If that happens there really isn’t anything we can do about it. Keep him warm and dry. Try to make sure he braces his chest when a bad coughing fit hits him. That rib is still cracked and there’s no cushion for it now. We don’t want it to turn into a break.”

Bucky nods, filling that information away.

“And his heart?”

“He’s extremely malnourished, Bucky,” Doc Miller sighs. “But his heart isn’t a concern right now. He needs to drink and eat as much as he can stomach, but slowly or he’ll make himself sick. Vitamin C tablets every morning with food and as much protein as you all can manage to scrounge up.”

“What about the fleas?”

“The what?”

Bucky rubs a hand over the back of his neck, feeling embarrassed on Gale’s behalf. “He, uh, he’s got fleas. In his hair.”

“Not lice?”

“Nope, saw the jumpy fuckers myself.”

“Fleas can carry diseases for humans, whereas lice can’t.’ Doc Miller informs him. “They’ve got to go.”

“I figured that much, Doc. How do I get rid of them?”

“Shave it off,” he gets in return, easy as anything and Bucky’s already shaking his head.

His stomach turns and he thinks of the countless times he’s seen Gale putting pomade into his hair, working sure fingers in confident strokes to style it just right. Thinks of the expensive shampoo Gale purchased with their first paychecks as cadets in flight school on their first pass off base. Thinks of how the least vain man in the Air Force, despite being the most beautiful one, taking pride in the blonde strands that give him the movie star look.

He thinks of his own fingers running through it and the softness in

Gale's eyes when he does it. Thinks of how much comfort it brings the other man to be petted as the lay together in the dark.

And then he imagines the dull eyes that would meet his while Bucky sheared him, the acceptance in them that everything was taken from him in the last few weeks, why not take this too. Imagines that beautiful hair laying lifeless and bug ridden on the dirty floor and wants to throw up.

"I can't do that to him."

"His hair is the least of my worries, but if he infests the rest of the bunkhouse, you're all in for misery and he won't want to be the cause of it."

Infests, like he's some kind of dog his father won't let him bring inside the house. But the guilt Gale would feel is another matter, and that rings true.

"None of this is his fault," Bucky points out, voice bitter. "Give me another option. Please."

The Doc gives him a look and must see the desperation in expression because he sighs. He might not understand the importance but he's willing to indulge Bucky it seems.

"Ever been to the zoo? Seen the chimpanzees grooming each other?"

"He's not a fucking animal."

"That's all we are to them in here, Major. And they treated him worse than anyone would treat an animal for weeks. So that's your option. The Red Cross put Vaseline for wound care in the early packages. See if you can scrounge some. Put that on his scalp and work it to the ends. It'll trap them and make them easier to pull out. Pull them out and drop them in the snow. I wouldn't do it inside."

"Okay," Bucky says, already feeling miserable about this. He just wants to wrap Gale in his arms and let him rest. This is going to humiliate him.

"One more thing. Solitary confinement is used as a form of torture," Bucky swallows a lump in his throat. He knows that. He just can't put that word anywhere near his Gale without wanting to scream. "You need to watch out for his mental state."

“I’ll be watching everything Doc,” Bucky assures him.

“He’s lucky to have a friend like you,” Doc Miller says as he walks down the steps.

“I’m the lucky one,” Bucky tells him.

“I’ll check on him again tomorrow.”

Bucky doesn’t think he’ll ever forget the look on Gale’s face when he held up the tin of Vaseline and explained what was next on their agenda. He was right about the humiliation, but he hadn’t been expecting the tears that had brimmed in his eyes. Tears that sat and made his eyes glisten but didn’t fall. Tears he blinked away before he seemed to retreat in on himself completely.

He has Gale sitting on the middle step to the hut, wrapped in his coat and the new wool blanket, freshly washed hair now coated in thick greasy goop and looking absolutely miserable when Alex walks by.

“I’ll be right back,” he tells Gale, giving his shoulder a squeeze and heads for Alex.

“How’s he doing?” Alex greets him as he approaches.

“Okay, all things considered,” Bucky looks in the direction of the library. “Look, I’ve gotta do something with Buck. He’s got *fucking fleas.* And I’ve gotta do some grooming. Rather not have the boys see it happening. He doesn’t need that.”

“He’d hate that,” Alex agrees, looking up at Gale’s hunched figure. “They’re playing cards, reading. Same thing they’d be doing in the barracks. I’ll let them know he needs more time.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

“No problem, Major.”

When he returns to Gale, he’s coughing into his shoulder, face a barely concealed mask of pain. It makes Bucky’s own chest flare with hurt to see him like this, but he knows Gale doesn’t want his pity. He sits a step above him and plants both hands on his shoulders, looking down at the greased-up strands of hair.

“I’ll be quick as I can,” he tells him. Gale leans his weight to one side,

resting his shoulder against Bucky's knee, but says nothing.

The Vaseline does the trick, much to Bucky's surprise and relief. The insects are easy to see and unable to jump away. He starts with the obvious ones and then moves on, creating sections of hair to make sure he doesn't miss any.

He makes sure to scratch his fingers along Gale's scalp every few minutes, trying to soothe, hoping it helps. Some of the tension has melted out of the smaller man's form and Bucky is thankful for his strong legs as all of Gale's weight seems to be leaning against his right leg.

"So, Hawaii, huh?"

Silence reigns from Gale and Bucky would wonder if he'd fallen asleep if not for the fact that he's doing his best to keep his head raised.

"Warm beaches and coconuts still have the appeal?"

He feels Gale shift between his legs, and he coughs into his shoulder again, when he finally speaks, he sounds so tired.

"New it was gonna be cold in there," he speaks slowly, like it's an effort to do so. "I was right about that."

Bucky's only had him back for less than two hours and from the moment he got him, it's been a rush of necessity: hygiene and a check-up and now removing fucking bugs from his hair. They haven't had a moment to talk, to really talk. He doesn't know what Gale went through or how he's really doing.

"Yeah. What else was it like in there?"

He's met with silence again and he feels Gale tense up. He scratches his nails into his scalp in the section of hair he just finished.

"But I think I changed my mind about Hawaii already," Gale ignores his most recent question by answering his initial one. "I think we should take road trips and you can't do that on an island."

"Roadtrips, huh?"

"Yeah, think it'd be nice. You driving me around the country."

Bucky laughs. "You do know how to drive yourself, you know?"

“Like it better when you drive me though.”

“So I get the left seat in the car, you get it in the plane?”

“Sounds fair enough.”

“Not to this *pilot* it doesn’t,” Bucky laughs and feels his heart warm when he peers down and sees a smile pulling at Gale’s lips.

Bucky moves on to the final section of hair, eager to be done but happy he seems to have broken Gale from wherever his mind had wandered to before.

“I’ve been thinking about it too,” Bucky tells him. “The future, I mean.”

“That’s good John,” he can hear the smile in Gale’s voice as the smaller man reclines further against him.

“I want a dog,” Bucky admits.

“I want a cat,” Gale replies.

“Okay,” Bucky sighs. “We can get a cat.”

“We can get both, you martyr,” Gale huffs a quiet laugh and Bucky grins behind his head.

“Road trips and pets don’t really go together, Buck.”

“We’ll figure something out. Just like we always do.”

“Mhm,” Bucky agrees. He runs his fingers and his eyes over Gale’s hair a few more times, but he doesn’t see anymore insects. One more quick check, just to be sure, to make sure he doesn’t have to put Gale through this again, and he’s satisfied.

“Think I got ‘em all.”

“How many was it,” Gale asks, sitting up slowly. Bucky hears his back pop several times as he sits up and he winces in sympathy.

“You don’t want to know,” he tells him honestly.

They both stand. Gale reaches a trembling hand out to Bucky as he sways, and Bucky wraps his fingers around his.

“Woah,” Bucky pulls him close, steadying him. “You with me?”

“Dizzy,” Gale breathes out. “Think I need to sit back down.”

Bucky eyes the greasy mess of hair on his head warily, knows Gale won’t want that mess transferred into their bunk. But he’s tired of making him do things, even if they’re for his own good and he doesn’t have it in him to make him undress and get under that cold water again, not when he’s finally thawed him out.

He reaches up and pulls the wool stocking cap from atop his own head and pulls it down over Gales. He tucks the longer strands up under the edge and is satisfied when no hair is poking out.

Gale is looking at him in confusion, but he also looks fond, so Bucky shrugs and walks him back into the barracks.

“Don’t want our pillow to get all greasy,” Bucky tells him, and Gale looks embarrassed again, which is the opposite of what Bucky wants right now.

Gale is looking at his bunk, their bunk and Bucky guides him over with a steady arm around his waist. He leans Gale up against it but doesn’t offer to help him up yet.

“Do you want a lower one for now?” Bucky asks him. “I’m sure none of the guys wouldn’t mind switching for a bit.”

“No,” Gale shakes his head. “Been thinking about being in our bunk for too long. I don’t want to switch.”

Bucky’s heart squeezes at that and he can’t help but wrap his arms around Gale, happy when there is now hesitation before Gale’s arm wrap around his waist. Bucky’s eyes close and he breathes him in. He smells like Gale again. He wants to stay right here forever.

“How are we still alone?” Gale asks, voice muffled in his neck.

“I told Alex to keep them all away for a while longer,” Bucky admits.

“Till when?”

“I didn’t actually tell him when,” Bucky realizes. “Guess I should go to tell them they can come back, if you’re okay with it.”

Gale tenses so suddenly in his arms that Bucky pulls away, afraid he’s having a fit, but when he looks down, he sees fear in the other man’s

eyes and he's trembling again. He cups his face in his hand and soothes his thumb back and forth across his cheek.

"Hey, hey, you're alright Buck, it's alright. What's wrong?" Bucky tries to soothe, distressed that Gale's breathing is quickening. "You don't want the guys to come back? Is that it? I can give it more time before I run and get them."

Gale shakes his head, trying to turn his face away, but Bucky raises his other hand and frames his face, holding him steady.

"Talk to me," he pleads. "I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong."

"It's stupid," Gale mutters, shame in his eyes.

"I guarantee you it's not," Bucky leans in and presses his lip to his forehead. "Please, Buck."

"I don't want you to go get them," Gale says, cheeks flushing. "I don't care if they come back. But I don't want you to leave me here and go get them."

And Bucky feels foolish suddenly for not realizing that Gale had been alone for almost three weeks and he doesn't want to be alone now. That while they'd laid in bed together over a month ago now, he'd told Bucky not to leave him alone. He looks into those blue eyes, filled with shame he has no reason to feel, and he understands completely. Because suddenly the thought of even walking to the library and having Gale out of his sight for the ten minutes it would take fills him with dread.

"They'll come back once they collect their rations, even if I don't go get them," Bucky speaks softly, stoking those sharp cheekbones. "They're smart men."

The breath Gale releases is full of relief and Bucky ducks his head down and rubs his nose against Gale's. They breathe the same air for a moment, then another and then Bucky closes his eyes as dry, chapped lips press against his. He presses back softly and can't help the small noise of contentment that works its way up his throat and passed his lips. The scratchy facial hair on Gale's chin and upper lip is a new sensation, usually kept meticulously clean shaven and baby soft, but it's not an unpleasant one.

He feels Gale's lip part beneath his and he responds in kind. They share open mouthed kisses and Bucky feels Gale's hands come up rest

on his chest. He can't help but let his tongue slowly explore, a tentative touch of Gale's own meets his and Bucky groans at the familiar taste. One he couldn't forget in a million years. He pulls the smaller man closer as he deepens the kiss, relishing in the quiet moan that escapes Gale as their bodies press together, trapping his hands against Bucky's chest.

Bucky can't believe just a handful of hours ago, Gale had been locked away, out of his reach and now he was melting against him, panting into his mouth. He was never letting him go again. He wants to lift him into their bunk, strip him down and explore the skin he washed himself with his mouth. Wants to make him forget the loneliness, the fear and the cold. Wants to take him apart and put him back together and make his whole world about pleasure for a little while. But he knows he can't, not here.

He's jolted from their stolen moment of peace when Gale pulls his face away with a swift jerk of his head to cough straight into Bucky's shoulder. From how he's holding him he can feel the force of it and Doc Miller's voice sounds in his head so he wraps his arms around Gale's back, he's small enough right now that Bucky can easily get both hands to Gale's ribs. He braces them as Gale continues to cough until it tapers off into a groan, face still buried in Bucky's shoulder.

"I gotcha," he whispers into the hat resting around Gale's head.

Gale reluctantly pulls away, but not out of his reach. When he looks at Bucky his eyes are glassy, and he seems to be having trouble keeping his head up.

"You're exhausted," Bucky pinches his chin. "Let's get you up into bed and I'll find something decent for you to eat."

Gale looks at him for a beat before he leans forward and presses a soft kiss to his cheek. Bucky looks down at Gale with what he's sure is complete and total adoration.

"You're the sweetest thing," Bucky tells him and then he strokes the blush the blooms along Gale's cheek. "Come on, turn around, I'll help you up."

It takes some maneuvering and some strength on Bucky's part, but eventually Gale's reclined against the wall, slouched enough that his head doesn't hit the bunk above, feet hanging off the side. Bucky grabs the blanket that had fallen from around his shoulder while they'd kissed and drapes it over Gale, pulling it up to his chin and

tucking it under his thighs. He looks up with a smile and Gale looks so fond it makes him feel warm inside.

“Thanks, Bucky.”

“For you? Anything.”

He scrounges their stowed away food stash and Bucky decides to go for protein. He brings Gale a can of tuna and a fork but opens the can himself when he sees how shaky Gale’s hands still are.

“Go slow,” Bucky tells him, handing over the can. “Doc said you’ll make yourself sick if you eat too much too fast.”

Gale nods and Bucky watches him take a tentative bite, watches his eyes close and imagines it must be revelatory to taste something other than moldy bread after so many days. He props his arm on the bunk and rests his chin on it and just watches Gale take slow bites. Watches him chew and swallow like he’s learning to do it for the first time. Gale watches him watch him and Bucky can’t help but smile, so damn happy he’s here.

“What’re you smiling at?”

“Just you.”

Gale ducks his head a takes another small bite and soon another. After a few minutes though he passes the can back to Bucky. Looking down into it, he’s disappointed to see that Gale didn’t manage even half of it.

“Stomach’s cramping,” Gale admits when Bucky looks back at him.

Bucky frowns deeply but covers it with the lid and moves to set it on the table.

“It’s cold enough in here it’ll keep. We can try again later.”

“Or you could eat the rest,” Gale tells him. “You need to eat too Bucky.”

“I’ve had more than moldy bread lately,” Bucky argues. “And Brady will be bringing my rations of potatoes any minute now.”

“Protein might do you some good, especially with the extra weight you’ll be carrying now.”

Bucky can hear the self-deprecating tone and hates it.

“None of that,” Bucky walks back over to the bunk and wraps his fingers around Gale’s ankle. “You’d do the same thing for me. Hell, you did do it for me already when I was stuck with my head up my ass.”

“You had every right to feel how you felt and to express it how you wanted.” Gale nudges him with his foot. “You still do.”

“I didn’t have the right to hurt you,” Bucky clears his throat, familiar guilt rising. “I’m so sorry about that.”

Gale looks at him with that soft fond look again and shakes his head. “It’s okay Bucky. Men like us aren’t meant for places like this and it sunk its hooks in you deep. I understand. I just want you to be okay.”

Bucky’s eyes sting and he squeezes Gale’s ankle. “I’m okay right now.” He tells him honestly.

Gale smiles and then coughs into his shoulder for a solid thirty seconds.

“More okay than you are, sicky,” Bucky chuffs and walks away to get him some water.

He’s placing a Vitamin C tablet into Gale’s palm when there’s a knock on the door. The door pops open a few inches and Alex’s voice sounds through the crack, “You decent?”

Bucky laughs and Gale smiles and they tell him to come in. The door pushes open and a moment later, all of their men are walking through the door, filing into the hut. Bucky hands Gale the water and motions for him to take the pill, which he does with an eye roll.

“Buck!”

“Major!”

Good to see you, Major.”

“Glad your back, Buck!”

It seems like all twenty men swing by Gale’s bunk to welcome him back one by one and Bucky watches Gale sit up straighter and transform from Buck, *from Gale,* to Major Cleven in an instant. Gone are his expressive blue eyes that have been breaking Bucky’s heart all

afternoon, replaced by the cool mask he's used to wearing around everyone but Bucky. He smiles his small smile at each man in turn, leans forward enough to grasp Benny's hand, then Crank's and Brady's.

Bucky wonders if his other hand is cradling his cramping stomach under the blanket or cradling his sore ribs. He loves them all, but he suddenly wishes more than anything that they could be alone again. Gale doesn't have the energy to put up a front right now, but Bucky can tell he's not going to drop it. The only giveaway that Gale is uncomfortable under the scrutiny is that the bunk is shaking slightly with the motion of Gale bouncing his leg under the thick blanket. Not visible to anyone else, but Bucky can feel it.

"You alright, Major?" Brady is the first to break the silence after the initial welcomes are through.

"They tried to turn me into a popsicle and made sure I'd never want a piece of bread again in my life," Gale's voice is steady and there's a smirk on his lips. "But Bucky here is making sure I'm thawing out and he's already fed me twice."

The men laugh at his words and Bucky smiles, feeling proud of himself for taking good care of Gale. Despite it being delivered like a joke, Bucky hears the thanks in his words.

"Did Bucky tell you about all the food we squirreled away for you?" One of the younger men asks, eager to please.

"He did not," Gale looks at Bucky, eyebrows raised. "You boys better not have been depriving yourselves this whole time."

Bucky rolls his eyes and gestures dramatically at Gale, "What did I say?"

More laughter rings out as Gale looks on confused.

"I told these knuckleheads that you'd be very disappointed in them if they went without while trying to help you, so I made sure they didn't."

"That's right Buck. We've been taking good care of ourselves while you weren't around to do it for us," Benny tells him.

"That include you, Bucky?" Gale narrows his eyes.

“Sure,” Bucky gives him his best innocent smile. Gale doesn’t need to know that he hasn’t touched anything out of the Red Cross parcels since the day he went into that awful place.

“We’re splitting the rest of that tuna,” Gale tells him, tone brokering no room for argument.

“Whatever you say, Buck.”

A comfortable silence settles and some of the guys take their rations into their makeshift kitchen.

“So, what happened in here anyway,” Gale uncharacteristically breaks the silence. “Y’all get in the mood for Spring cleaning in December?”

“Bucky here inspired us to make the place presentable for our wayward Major’s return,” Crank laughs. “He even did laundry.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Gale nudges him through the blanket with his foot and smiles at him. Bucky ducks his head. “Looks real good.”

“Compared to the shithole you were in, I bet it does.” Bucky’s head snaps up at Macon’s words. He can see it was a joke, but he felt Gale’s relaxed posture tense at the reminder, and he won’t have that.

“Bucky,” Gale’s quiet voice cut his attention away from the object of his anger. “Can you get me some more water?” He coughs into his elbow and blinks slowly at him and Bucky’s anger melts away in an instant. He takes the empty cup from Gale’s hand and moves to fill it.

“You’re not wrong about that, Macon,” Gales agrees with a strained smile.

The men start getting comfortable, setting up cards, arranging their bunks. Bucky returns to Gale’s side and hands him the water, frowns at how much his hand shakes while he takes a drink.

“Major,” Bucky looks to the right, startled by the sudden close proximity of Alex. Gale straightens. “I just wanted to say thank you, for what you did for me. And I’m sorry it happened at all.”

“Nothing to thank me for and nothing at all for you to be sorry for Alex,” Gale’s smile is genuine. “I’m sure they went a lot easier on me than they would’ve on you, so it all worked out in the end.”

“Did they?” Alex questions. “Go easy on you?”

Bucky watches Gale's face change minutely behind his mask, smile faltering for a second before it's back. "Easy enough."

"Thank you." Alex says again, reaching his hand out. Gale opens his mouth to protest, and Bucky claps a hand onto his shin to cut him off.

"Just say your welcome you humble bastard," Bucky grumbles and it makes Alex and Gale laugh, breaks the tension.

"You're welcome," Gale mumbles, sheepish and shakes Alex's hand.

"You're ridiculous," Bucky rolls his eyes at Gale as Alex walks away. He decides to leave his hand on Gale's leg though. Not keen on not touching him after so long being unable to do so.

The night continues on as usual. They all eat potato soup. Bucky convinces Gale to take a few bites but relents when he can see the discomfort it's causing him. Makes him take another couple bites of tuna and relents on that again when it seems to make it worse. Gale convinces him to eat the rest and he has to hide his groan at how good it tastes, rolling his eyes at Gale's knowing smirk.

The men play cards and Bucky continues standing like a sentinel in from of Gale's bunk until his legs start to grow numb. He doesn't even realize he's doing it until Gale pokes him in the back with his foot to get his attention.

"You guarding me?" Gale asks, quiet enough no one else can hear.

"I guess I am," Bucky says.

"From what exactly?" Gale looks around the room, eyebrows raised.

"From everything," Bucky shrugs, serious all of a sudden as he realized that's exactly what he's been doing since Gale crawled into the bed. "I'm going to protect you from everything."

The look Gale gives him is so tender he could kiss him, audience be damned, but he won't. Their staring contest is interrupted by another coughing fit that rips through Gale and leaves him panting. Bucky knows the other men have stopped what they're doing to stare, not having realized until now that Gale isn't well with how well he hides it.

"Protect me from this cough and get me some water?" Gale holds the cup out to him.

Gale drinks it slowly, one hand clutching his stomach. When it's gone, he hands the cup to Bucky again.

"More?"

Gale shakes his head, and Bucky can see the pain around his eyes.

"You gonna be sick?" Bucky asks, worry ratcheting up. He watches as Gale closes his eyes and breathes through his nose a few times, then tips himself over so he's laying on his side, head on their pillow.

"Buck?"

"I'm okay," Gale grinds out, teeth clenched. "Just hurts."

Bucky wants to growl in frustration because there is nothing *okay* about Gale hurting. He turns around and sees that the men have politely averted their eyes, but it's quieter now, he knows they're worried.

He turns back to Gale, reaches out and places his palm over the hat on his head, lets his thumb smooth over the line between his eyebrows.

"Your stomach?"

"Think I over did it," Gale grits out, bringing his knees to his chest, trying to find some relief.

How half a can of tuna, a bite of potato, some raisins and some water can be overdoing it for a man that's skin and bones, Bucky doesn't know. But he doesn't like it. He resigns himself for another talk with Doc Miller tomorrow because Gale needs to eat, but Bucky can't watch him writhe in pain every time he does it.

Gale's shivering under the blanket, face lined with pain and Bucky can't take it anymore.

"I'm calling it a night boys," Bucky says over his shoulder. Gale's eyes open and lock onto his as he pulls his heavy coat off and lays it over Gale, then adds the blankets he's been using on top of those. "I'm coming in Major, prepare for landing."

Gale smiles at him and attempts to scoot over, grimacing as he tries to uncurl in order to shuffle over. Bucky shushes him and climbs up, gently crawling under the blankets and maneuvering himself so he's halfway under Gale.

He ends up with one of Gale knees bent and curled across his thighs, Gale on his side with his head pillowed on Bucky's chest, wool hat scratching his chin. It's the most comfortable he's been in weeks.

He lets one of his arms curl around Gale's back until his palm curves around his side and rests on his stomach. He winces in sympathy because he can feel the muscles there contract under his hand.

"Tell me something," Gales mumbles into his chest.

Bucky hums, trying to think of something interesting that will distract him from the pain.

"Doc Miller," Bucky starts. "His dad was veterinarian. Focused on horses. Did you know that?"

Considering he just learned it last week, he doubts Gale knows that, but he does know that Gale loves horses. He feels Gale's head shake in the negative.

"They're not from the cowboy state, but they're from Nebraska so, close enough. Said he raised American Quarter Horses when he was a kid." Bucky doesn't know the difference between one horse and the next, but he has a feeling Gale does and his suspicions are confirmed when Gale makes a small noise.

"I had one when I was a kid," Gale says.

"A horse?" Bucky didn't know that.

"An American Quarter Horse," Gale confirms. "Brown with white paint on all four legs. Named her Socks."

Bucky smiles at the childish name.

"My old man lost her in a bet," Gale's voice is heavy with feeling. "I think I was ten."

Bucky's smile falls. He can picture a scrawny, blonde-haired little boy with big blue doe-eyes, crying and wishes his imagination wasn't so vivid.

"I'm sorry," he presses his lips to the top of Gale's head to whisper the words.

"'S'okay," Gale mumbles back.

It's not. And Bucky decides right then and there that in addition to a house and a dog and a cat, they're going to have an American Quarter Horse, maybe two. If they can't find a house with a barn to buy, he'll just build a barn himself. He'll give Gale everything he wants.

"Well my attempt at distracting you from the pain backfired," he rubs his hand over Gale's belly, feeling guilty.

Gale huffs a laugh and lowers his leg a little.

"Starting to hurt less now," Gale says.

"Good," Bucky breathes a sigh of relief. "You can talk to Doc Miller about horses tomorrow while he figures out how to make it so this doesn't happen every time you eat."

He flinches slightly when Gale pinches his side, grumbling at him. "Worrywart."

"Hypocrite," Bucky chuffs and pinches him back, very gently.

The light at the table turns off and a moment later the shutters on the outside of the barracks start to close. Muffled German can be heard through the wall and Gale curls in impossibly closer to Bucky, like he's trying to burrow inside of him.

Bucky holds him close and brings one hand up to press over the side of Gale face, covering his ear and holding his head firmly to his chest. The shutters closest to their bed slam shut and the voices grow distant and then silent.

He releases his hold on Gale's head and runs his hand up and down his shoulder.

"They're gone," Bucky tells him.

"Sorry," Gale mumbles.

"Stop apologizing," Bucky chides.

They lay in silence for a while, listening to the sounds of the men around them climbing into their own bunks and settling in.

"I am a hypocrite," Gale whispers into the darkness and Bucky's brow furrows in confusion. "I worried about you while I was in there."

Bucky swallows, not surprised, but upset all the same.

“You told me once that I was the only thing keeping you sane in here. I was trying real hard before I went away.”

Bucky squeezes him, he knows that.

“You didn’t just *go away*, Buck,” Bucky whispers back. Anger igniting at the lackadaisical wording, as if Gale went on a trip. As if he wasn’t cruelly separated from everything he knew and treated like dirt. “They took you away from me and I couldn’t do anything to make them give you back.”

He feels Gale turn his head enough so he can rest his chin on his chest and look up at him.

“I’m glad you didn’t try,” Gale admits. “I was worried you’d do something stupid, get yourself hurt or worse.”

Bucky won’t tell him that he’d had the same thought. He brushes his knuckles against Gale’s cheek.

“I hate that you spent all your time twisting yourself into knots worrying about some loony.”

“My loony,” Gale knocks his forehead gently against Bucky’s chin. “And it wasn’t all my time. I didn’t dream about it. Didn’t dream at all really. Only dream I can even remember was about ice cream.” He huffs a sheepish laugh.

“Of course it was,” Bucky chuckles. “Why dream about the love of your life when you can dream about sweets?”

“You were there too,” Gale smiles at him and Bucky doesn’t know how he survived the last eighteen days without him.

He feels Gale’s back tighten under his arm and a moment later he turns his head away to cough into Bucky’s chest. Pressed this close Bucky can feel the heaving breathes, the vibration in his chest and his own stomach feels like its cramping.

“I hate that,” Bucky admits when Gale finally stops. He’s melted onto Bucky again, head tucked back under his chin. “I never could stand it when you were sick.”

“I know,” Gale’s voice is lower, slower. “Hate seeing you sick too.”

He feels Gale yawn, big like a wild cat, against his chest before he

nuzzles his face right over Bucky's heart. He doesn't even realize how adorable he is, doesn't even try, just cracks Bucky's chest open and it makes it ooze with affection with zero conscious effort.

"Go to sleep, Buck," he presses his lip to his head, cursing the Vaseline and the hat and the fleas and the Nazis because he can't run his fingers through Gale's hair.

"Love you," Gale mutters, as he fades away and Bucky's eyes sting.

"I love you too."

Bucky goes from a dreamless sleep to wide awake in a moment and lays staring at the wooden bunk above his own. The room is silent, save for the snores of the other men around the room. He'd cold, but not so much so that it would have woken him up and he closes his eyes again, wonders briefly if the haze of sleep is close enough that he can sink his claws back into it.

But he moves his arm and it curls around nothing and he feels the panic swing into his chest like a physical thing. *Where is Gale? He was just here? Wasn't he?*

He turns over and relief floods him as he sees the silhouette of his reason for breathing, close enough to reach out and touch. Gale's back is to him and he's sitting up, facing the wall. Bucky reaches out and gently folds his hand around Gale's waist.

"Buck?" He whispers, thankful his touch didn't earn him a flinch. "What are you doing?"

He gets no response, only silence and he starts to worry so he shuffles closer and sits up too, bracketing the smaller man's back and hooking his chin over his shoulder. When he does, his heart stalls for a moment. He can feel shivers wracking the slender frame and he can see his arm shake where it's held out straight in front of him, fingers tracing over the lines he'd carved into the wall. A mark for each night he had to sleep without Gale in his arms. A mark for each night Gale spent in hell.

"Buck?"

"I didn't realize it was that many days." Gale's voice is rough from sleep and getting rougher from his cough.

And Bucky doesn't know what to say. He'd thought that maybe Gale was drawing his own lines in the Cooler. Marking time away with nothing else to do. Thought that maybe they had a similar ritual connecting them from across the camp.

"It's your birthday," Bucky tells him gently, unsure if he even knows what day it is. Gale drops his hand from the wall and jerks his head around, dislodging Bucky's chin from his shoulder. He stares into Bucky's face with wide eyes, looking like he's searching for a lie.

"I missed Christmas?" Gale asks softly. And he says it with such disappointment, such childlike sadness at the thought that Bucky wants to cry.

"Yeah," Bucky reaches out and takes his hand, not liking the chill he feels in those slender fingers. "But you didn't miss much, not in here."

Gale swallows heavily, grimacing as he does and Bucky wants to wrap him up and tuck him away until the end of the war.

"Next year, we'll have the best Christmas you can dream of."

"Okay," Gale looks back at the wall and then back at him and Bucky swears his eyes look brighter than before.

"Buck?"

"It's fine," he mumbles. "I'm fine."

He's shaking visibly now. Bucky stares at his face. He looks awful. He looks exhausted and sick and too fucking thin and scared. He looks so hauntingly beautiful that it almost hurts to look at him, but Bucky can't look away.

"You're freezing," Bucky puts his arm around his shoulders and pulls him closer. "You're sick and your beat."

He reclines back and pulls Gale with him, content when the smaller man tucks himself back into his side once again. He makes himself small, burrows into Bucky's warmth. Bucky pulls up their layers of blankets and tucks him in just as Gale tucks his face under his jaw and presses it into his neck like he's hiding from the world.

In that moment, Bucky is grateful for his size. He feels like if someone looked into their bunk, they wouldn't see Gale. He feels like he can block out the world and keep Gale safe in his arms, where he belongs.

Where he's always belonged.

He feels Gale's eyelashes flutter against his throat, feels the coarse material of the wool hat on his head against his chin and then he feels moisture on his neck and collarbone. A moment later his heart shatters as he realizes that Gale is crying silent tears into his neck hidden from everyone but him.

"Buck?"

"Gale?"

He gets a slight shake of the head now cradled in his hand and a few mumbled apologies, but nothing else. He won't lift his face and he can't seem to stop the tears from flowing if the growing damp spot Bucky can now feel on the collar of his shirt is any indication.

"Okay," Bucky breathes out. "I've gottcha, I've gotcha now. You're safe."

Bucky doesn't know what he's crying for specifically. He doesn't think it's truly about missing Christmas. They haven't had a chance to talk about his experience yet, not in any meaningful way. Bucky has no way of saying the right thing, and he thinks maybe he doesn't need to. Maybe Gale was strong for long enough, maybe it's time for him to let go and feel it and this is where he knows he is safe to do it. With Bucky.

He thinks of Gale alone and cold and scared without the warm touch that's currently wrapping him up in a strong hold, rubbing soothingly down his back. Thinks of him without the safety he admitted he only feels when he's with Bucky. Thinks of the silence he had to endure.

So he holds him close and starts to hum a Christmas carol. Then he hums another and another and another until finally Gale relaxes, going completely boneless against him. His neck is damp, but Bucky is sure his tears have stopped, and he thinks he might have fallen asleep.

He's about to start humming a final carol when a sleep-soft voice reaches his ears, lips brushing his neck.

"Now do our song."

Bucky smiles into his hat atop Gale's head and he loves him so much. He hums Blue Skies until Gale's soft exhales that indicate deep sleep caress the delicate skin of his throat and beckons him to follow.

End Notes

The boys left Stalag Luft III on the forced march on January 27, 1945. So in this canon-divergence, they've got exactly a month to get Gale back on his feet.

Part two will explore that month.
Part three will be the march.

If you made it this far, thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed it!

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